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Article

Evolving Landscapes of Investment: Revisiting the Model of Investment in the Face of Sociopolitical Shifts

Michael Rabbidge*
The University of Waikato, New Zealand

Abdul Saboor Zaheeb
Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, South Korea

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Abstract
A decade after its introduction, Darvin and Norton's (2015) Model of Investment remains a cornerstone in understanding the intersection of identity, capital, and ideology in language learning. This commentary revisits the model in light of evolving sociopolitical contexts, exploring its applicability and adaptability to rapidly shifting global landscapes. Specifically, it foregrounds the fluidity of symbolic capital, the complexities of identity negotiation, and the ideological forces that shape learners' positioning within power structures. Drawing on research conducted in Afghanistan during periods of significant ideological upheaval, the article demonstrates how sociopolitical instability, gendered oppression, and class-based exclusion influence learners' investments in language practices. By applying an intersectional lens, the commentary conceptualizes context as multi-layered—comprising co-existing and, at times, contradictory ideological frameworks and social conditions. This perspective reveals how identity, capital, and ideology interact dynamically, producing both barriers and possibilities for language learners. In doing so, the commentary extends the theoretical scope of the Model of Investment, offering a more comprehensive and inclusive account of language learning under conditions of marginalization. It concludes with implications for policy and pedagogy, advocating for decolonial approaches and inclusive practices in TESOL. Ultimately, this work affirms the enduring relevance of the Model of Investment while pushing its boundaries to better engage with the complexities of a globalized and ideologically charged world.

Keywords
Investment, intersectionality, Afghanistan, ideology, identity

*Corresponding author. Email: michael.rabbidge@waikato.ac.nz

1 Introduction

The past decade has continued the trend in unprecedented shifts in global landscapes, marked by escalating sociopolitical instability, rapid technological advancement, and the pervasive influence of neoliberal ideologies. These forces intersect to create a world increasingly defined by economic uncertainty and precarity. Neoliberal economic reforms—characterized by deregulation, privatization, and the erosion of social welfare—have transformed labour markets, promoting flexible, short-term, and insecure employment structures (Block et al., 2012). As stable job opportunities decline, individuals are compelled to adopt entrepreneurial identities, continuously marketing their skills and labour to remain competitive in volatile global markets (Liu, 2024; Theng, 2021). This valorisation of self-reliance and individual responsibility reinforces systemic inequalities, shifting the burden of economic survival onto individuals while masking the structural roots of precarity. Education systems, shaped by these neoliberal logics, increasingly prioritize digital learning, critical literacy framed through marketable skills, and vocational training designed to produce adaptable workers rather than critically engaged citizens (Liu, 2023; Liu, 2025). While social movements advocating for climate justice, gender equality, and racial equity challenge these inequities, their efforts are frequently constrained by neoliberal framings that reduce collective struggles to matters of personal responsibility and self-improvement.

As global educational paradigms increasingly emphasize digital learning, critical literacy, and skills-based training, new forms of engagement with language and literacy have emerged. The rise of online education platforms has enabled expanded access despite infrastructural and social barriers (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021), yet it has also amplified concerns about the quality and equity of these learning experiences (Basar et al., 2021). Concurrently, critical literacy movements advocate for pedagogies that equip learners to interrogate power, inequality, and justice (Comber, 2015). However, these aims often sit uneasily alongside neoliberal discourses that prioritize economic productivity through skills-based training, thereby marginalizing critical inquiry and civic engagement (Block et al., 2012). Within the realms of language education, Darvin and Norton's (2015) Model of Investment provides a dynamic framework for understanding how identity, capital, and ideology interact to shape language learning and teaching as social practice. Rooted in Bourdieu's (1986) notion of symbolic capital and a poststructuralist view of identity, the model challenges traditional motivational paradigms by situating language learning within broader socio and cultural contexts (Darvin & Norton, 2015).

This convergence of ideological shifts necessitates a re-evaluation of the Model of Investment to address the complexity of learners' experiences in the 21st century. Drawing on data from research in the Afghan context, this commentary examines how rapidly evolving sociopolitical landscapes reshape learners' access to linguistic resources and influence identity negotiations. Through the lens of intersectionality, we interrogate how gender, class, and ideological control intersect to structure (and restrict) investment in language learning. By foregrounding the lived experiences of marginalized learners, we argue for a reconceptualization of symbolic capital as inherently fluid and context-dependent, particularly in settings marked by exclusion and instability.

In doing so, this study extends the theoretical scope of the Model of Investment and contributes to broader debates surrounding decolonial and inclusive pedagogies in TESOL. It highlights the need for responsive educational strategies that consider how systemic oppressions influence learners' ability to claim legitimacy and invest in language practices. As such, the commentary offers both critical insights and practical implications for educators and policymakers working in similarly constrained sociopolitical contexts, emphasizing the value of adaptive, equity-oriented frameworks for understanding language learning and identity construction.

2 The Model of Investment

2.1 Revisiting the model

In this model, investment is situated at the intersection of identity, capital, and ideology, presenting it as a deeply sociopolitical act (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Unlike traditional motivational models, which often emphasize individual cognitive processes, this model foregrounds the learner's relationship with the world, shaped by historical, cultural, and power-laden structures.

Darvin and Norton (2023) critically differentiate between the concepts of motivation and investment, emphasizing that while both contribute to understanding individual's participation in L2 learning, they arise from distinct theoretical traditions and offer divergent explanatory frameworks. Motivation, deeply rooted in psychological theories, focuses primarily on the cognitive and affective factors that influence an individual's willingness to learn, often treating the learner as a rational, self-directed agent (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1992). Classic motivational models, such as Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and the process model of L2 motivation (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002), foreground agency and goal-directed behaviour, assuming that learners exercise full control over their engagement with language communities. These models positioned success or failure largely as a consequence of individual effort, decision-making, and internal motivation (Dickinson, 1995).

In contrast to the individualistic perspectives that dominate traditional motivational theories, the concept of investment offers a sociological framework that foregrounds the complex interplay of identity, power, and social positioning within language learning contexts (Norton & Darvin, 2021). Investment theory challenges the assumption that learners exercise full autonomy over their engagement with language learning opportunities, emphasizing instead how structural inequalities, social marginalization, and exclusion from dominant linguistic communities constrain their participation. Learners may exhibit strong motivation to acquire a new language but find their efforts obstructed by limited access to educational resources, exclusionary social practices, or ideological barriers that devalue their linguistic identities (Rabbidge & Zaheeb, 2023). In this way, investment theory shifts the analytical focus from individual effort to the broader sociopolitical conditions, lived experiences, and historical inequalities that shape language learning trajectories and restrict learners' capacity to convert motivation into meaningful investment (Darvin & Norton, 2023).

Within this commentary, the fluidity of symbolic capital is understood as the shifting value, recognition, and convertibility of linguistic and cultural resources across varying sociopolitical landscapes. Drawing on Bourdieu (1991), linguistic competencies do not possess stable or universal symbolic value; rather, their significance fluctuates in response to changing ideological discourses, power relations, and material conditions. As Bourdieu (1991) argues, symbolic capital derives its legitimacy not inherently but through its recognition within specific institutional and discursive contexts. Accordingly, the significance of particular linguistic practices fluctuates in response to changing ideological discourses, power configurations, and material conditions. In the Afghan context, for example, the symbolic value of English is deeply contingent on gender norms, class positioning, and prevailing political regimes, at times regarded as a marker of modernity and social mobility, and at others dismissed as a symbol of cultural transgression (Rabbidge & Zaheeb, 2023). Similarly, the complexities of identity negotiation refer to the contested and often contradictory identity positions that learners must navigate within intersecting systems of power, cultural expectations, and material constraints. From this perspective, identity is not a fixed or unified construct but a dynamic and context-dependent process, continuously shaped by access to capital, ideological discourses, and lived experiences of marginalization and resistance.

While the Model of Investment has made significant contributions to understanding these sociopolitical dynamics, it remains underdeveloped in its engagement with contexts characterized by extreme instability and ideological control, such as those currently experienced in Afghanistan. In particular, the model does not sufficiently theorize how intersecting structures, including gender-based

oppression, class-driven disparities in access to linguistic resources, and the ideological policing of language learning, simultaneously limit and mediate learners' capacities to invest in language acquisition. This commentary addresses these critical gaps by applying an intersectional lens to the Model of Investment, demonstrating how overlapping systems of oppression and privilege create both barriers and possibilities for language learners. In doing so, it extends the model's theoretical reach, offering a more nuanced framework for understanding how investment operates within contexts marked by sociopolitical upheaval, ideological contestation, and material constraint.

2.2 Identity as a site of struggle

Darvin and Norton (2023) conceptualize identity as multiple, fluid, and contested, shaped by the interrelation of habitus, desire, and imagination (Bourdieu, 1986). Within this framework, identity becomes a site of struggle, where learners navigate and negotiate their positions within overlapping power structures. For example, in postcolonial contexts, learners often align their identities with global discourses of modernity and economic advancement, frequently symbolized by English, while simultaneously maintaining connections to local cultural norms and values (Rabbidge & Zaheeb, 2023). This negotiation highlights not only the tensions between individual agency and structural constraints but also the coexistence of global and local ideologies that shape language investment.

Rather than viewing ideological landscapes as purely oppositional, recent research illustrates how global and national ideologies often coexist and may even reinforce each other. De Costa et al. (2016) describe how investments in English can simultaneously serve global market ambitions and national development agendas. In such cases, the pursuit of English proficiency becomes a means to participate in global capitalism while also fulfilling nationalistic aspirations for modernization and economic growth. Tajeddin et al. (2023) further demonstrate this layered dynamic in their analysis of English language learners in Iran, who navigate the competing influences of state and non-state educational institutions. State schools emphasize Persian as a symbol of national and Islamic identity, while private institutions promote English as a gateway to global mobility and economic opportunity. Learners in this context do not simply experience ideological conflict; rather, they strategically position themselves within these multi-layered ideological spaces, balancing aspirations for international engagement with adherence to local cultural expectations.

This process of identity negotiation underscores the agency of learners as they manage complex and sometimes contradictory investments shaped by sociocultural contexts, imagined futures, and access to symbolic and material resources. Such negotiations reveal that ideological landscapes are not only contested but are also sites of alignment, coexistence, and strategic accommodation. In this way, learners actively challenge restrictive ideologies while also leveraging them to reimagine their roles within both local and global contexts.

2.3 Capital and ideology

Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of capital (1986), the model distinguishes between economic, cultural, and social forms, each convertible under certain ideological conditions. Ideology operates invisibly, shaping learners' access to symbolic resources and determining inclusion or exclusion within social fields.

The forms of capital, including economic, cultural, social, and symbolic, all play a crucial role in shaping learners' investments in language learning, particularly as they intersect with specific ideologies. Economic capital, encompassing material resources such as wealth, determines access to language education opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986; Darvin & Norton, 2015). In ideologically divided contexts like Iran, learners with greater financial resources are able to invest in non-state English language institutes, which promote globally oriented pedagogies aligned with neoliberal ideologies emphasizing economic advancement and global competitiveness (Tajeddin et al., 2023).

Cultural capital, defined as knowledge, skills, and educational qualifications, is also mediated by ideologies (Bourdieu, 1986; Darvin & Norton, 2015). For instance, in gendered contexts, cultural capital such as English proficiency often reflects societal expectations tied to gender roles, influencing how learners negotiate their professional aspirations and social identities (Sung, 2023).

Similarly, social capital, which encompasses networks and relationships, provides learners with access to linguistic and cultural opportunities that are highly valued in globalized contexts (Bourdieu, 1986; Darvin & Norton, 2015).For example, cross-border learners strategically navigate their social networks to gain access to transnational communities, aligning their investments with ideologies that emphasize global citizenship and mobility (Zhang & Huang, 2024).

Finally, symbolic capital, referring to the prestige and recognition attached to other forms of capital, highlights the tension between dominant and competing ideologies (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Liu & Darvin, 2024). The symbolic value of English as a global lingua franca often contrasts with nationalist ideologies that prioritize indigenous languages, as seen in Iranian state schools' promotion of Persian as a marker of cultural identity (Shahidzade & Mazdayasna, 2022). Together, these forms of capital illustrate how learners' language investments are deeply embedded in ideologically charged sociopolitical contexts, underscoring the need to address these intersections in equitable language education policies.

3 Dynamic Sociopolitical Contexts and Contested Investment

3.1 Education in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's higher education system has undergone significant transformation since 2001, despite enduring challenges related to political instability, infrastructure damage, and systemic exclusion. Historically regarded as one of the strongest in South Asia, Afghanistan's universities suffered severe setbacks due to decades of war, faculty displacement, and ideological restrictions, particularly under the Taliban, which barred women from education entirely (Babury & Hayward, 2014). The National Higher Education Strategic Plan (2010–2014) sought to rebuild institutions through quality assurance measures, curriculum reform, and increased access to tertiary education (Education & Unesco, 2009). Notably, student enrolment expanded from 54,683 in 2008 to 130,195 in 2013, demonstrating the demand for higher education. Additionally, faculty recruitment transitioned towards a merit-based system, accompanied by investments in graduate-level training programs to address the shortage of qualified educators. However, the influence of sociopolitical dynamics on educational investments has been stark, particularly in relation to English language learning. During the U.S.-backed era (2001–2021), English was framed as a symbolic and economic asset, enabling social mobility and access to global opportunities (Coleman, 2021; De Costa et al., 2021). Yet, the Taliban's return in 2021 radically reshaped linguistic investments, devaluing English and restricting access to education, particularly for women (Amiri, 2023).

3.2 Taliban 2.0

The resurgence of the Taliban has not only reversed many of the educational gains made since 2001 but has also reinforced rigid gender hierarchies that systematically exclude women from academic and professional spaces. As Wani (2024) highlights, Taliban 2.0 has institutionalized gender-based repression, particularly through the dissolution of the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the re-establishment of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which enforces strict limitations on women's mobility, employment, and education. This ideological shift has dramatically impacted higher education, with universities now operating under restrictive policies that curtail academic freedom and prevent female students from attending classes. While digital platforms once provided alternative learning spaces, the Taliban's increasing control over online networks has further marginalized women, limiting their ability to engage in informal education (Wani, 2024).

Despite these constraints, Afghan women continue to resist through informal learning networks and digital platforms, seeking alternative avenues for education and economic engagement (Noori et al., 2022; Wani, 2024). However, access to these digital spaces is uneven, with class-based disparities disproportionately affecting women in rural and lower-income communities. While digital resistance enables some women to maintain access to education, the broader collapse of institutional support structures has severely limited the long-term sustainability of such efforts. Moreover, the Taliban's economic mismanagement and escalating humanitarian crisis exacerbate the precariousness of Afghanistan's educational landscape, further deepening gendered educational inequalities (Noori et al., 2022; Wani, 2024). Without sustained funding and policies supporting academic freedom and gender equity, Afghanistan's higher education system risks stagnation, hindering long-term national development. As Wani (2024) argues, unless the Taliban embraces a more inclusive governance approach, Afghanistan's sociopolitical landscape will remain deeply fractured, with women bearing the brunt of extremist policies.

These sociopolitical shifts demonstrate how rapidly changing power structures can redefine the symbolic value of English and destabilize learners' imagined futures. For instance, while English was previously linked to upward mobility and global engagement (Rabbidge & Zaheeb, 2023) it has become a contested space where access is restricted by gender, geography, and political ideology. Learners must navigate these ideological constraints, which impact their ability to invest in English and negotiate identity positions. This highlights the interplay of ideology, capital, and identity in shaping language investment, emphasizing the need to contextualize investment theory within dynamic and evolving sociopolitical landscapes.

4 Applying Intersectionality to the Model of Investment

This section advances a more integrated application of the Model of Investment by foregrounding intersectionality to deepen understanding of how contextual factors shape both evolving identity positions and the fluid valuation of symbolic capital. Incorporating intersectionality within the model's dimensions of identity and capital enables a more nuanced analysis of how individuals navigate language learning and social positioning across diverse and often inequitable contexts. While the Model of Investment acknowledges intersecting influences, there remains a need to more explicitly examine how complex and overlapping systems of power, such as gendered oppression, class-based exclusion, and ideological control, mediate learners' access to symbolic resources and shape their identity negotiations.

By applying an intersectional lens, this commentary demonstrates that language learners do not simply encounter isolated barriers but must navigate interconnected systems of inequality that simultaneously constrain and enable their language learning opportunities. This framework offers a clearer understanding of how investment decisions emerge from the dynamic interplay of social positioning, material access, and imagined futures.

Intersectionality is a conceptual framework that examines how multiple axes of identity, such as gender and nationality, interact with broader contextual conditions, including class structures, social networks, and language ideologies, to shape systemic inequalities and individual lived experiences (Block & Corona, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989). This framework highlights not only the interconnected nature of social identities but also the structural forces that condition and constrain those identities. By analysing the simultaneous and interdependent effects of both identity positions and sociopolitical contexts, intersectionality enables a more comprehensive understanding of discrimination, oppression, and marginalization. It challenges singular or additive approaches to social analysis, advocating instead for a nuanced examination of how overlapping systems of power and privilege shape both identity negotiations and access to material and symbolic resources.

Building on this framework, intersectionality research frequently examines how gender intersects with broader contextual conditions to shape lived experiences (Block & Corona, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989). However, such analyses remain underexplored within the field of language investment. Gendered dimensions of investment are particularly salient in contexts like Afghanistan, where patriarchal norms and restrictive policies severely limit women's access to language learning opportunities (Amiri, 2023). In these settings, English is often perceived by women as a means to resist dominant gender ideologies that confine them to traditional roles, though their investments in English are accompanied by heightened risks and barriers (Rabbidge & Zaheeb, 2023; Sung, 2023). For many, acquiring English enables forms of independence and agency previously unavailable to them in Afghan society. The ability to use English is imbued with symbolic capital, representing modernity, competence, and global affiliation. This symbolic value allows Afghan women, particularly in urban areas, to challenge societal expectations and gain access to employment as language teachers, NGO workers, and hospitality staff (Rabbidge & Zaheeb, 2023). However, the value of this symbolic capital is fluid, celebrated in some urban and professional spaces, yet devalued or even stigmatized in more conservative or rural contexts where English is associated with foreign ideologies or moral transgression.

However, gender is not the only factor influencing investment in English. Class-based inequalities are also a factor in shaping access to quality language education, with wealthier individuals having greater opportunities to develop proficiency (Akbari & True, 2022; Qazi Zada & Qazi Zada, 2024). Class-based inequalities may perform a gatekeeper function in accessing improved employment prospects in international organizations and private businesses. In these cases, symbolic capital, such as fluency in English or affiliation with Western-style institutions, can be converted into economic capital, but only when its value is recognized within the surrounding ideological landscape. This reinforces the idea that symbolic capital is not fixed, but contingent on broader social and political acceptance. The complexities surrounding the political contestation of access to English reveal the extent to which it is perceived as a necessity for economic mobility of members across a society, and this controversy is subject to various constraints such as ideological resistance from conservative factions, particularly in rural areas, where it is framed as a foreign imposition incompatible with Afghan culture and religion (Coleman, 2021).

Despite these barriers, social networks and digital platforms provide alternative avenues for learning in contexts like Afghanistan (Noori et al., 2022). Many learners, especially women, bypass institutional restrictions empowered by ideologies that seek to marginalize their learning opportunities by engaging with online communities, self-study resources, and international contacts (Noori et al., 2022; Rabbidge & Zaheeb, 2023). Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube have become particularly significant in EFL learning, allowing students and educators to access academic resources, communicate, and develop language skills despite infrastructural and policy-driven constraints (Noori et al., 2022). These platforms offer alternative pathways to acquiring symbolic capital, particularly for learners whose access to formal institutions is restricted. However, the legitimacy of such capital remains contingent upon how digital learning is perceived within different ideological contexts, celebrated in some urban or international spaces but potentially dismissed as illegitimate or subversive in others. However, the effectiveness of these digital tools is uneven, as access disparities, particularly in rural areas, further widen educational inequities. Additionally, political control that espouses restive language ideologies further complicates the status of English. In some cases, English accrues symbolic capital as a tool of empowerment and global alignment; in others, it is stripped of value and cast as a threat to national or religious identity (Liu, 2025; Rabbidge & Zaheeb, 2023). These competing ideological frames reveal the fluid and unstable nature of symbolic capital, as it shifts in value according to prevailing political narratives and power structures. In this complex landscape, the role of social media is paradoxical: while it fosters inclusion and accessibility, it simultaneously exposes users to regulatory scrutiny and potential restrictions (Wani, 2024).

Intersectionality reveals how the female participants in these studies navigate multiple, overlapping axes of identity and social conditions that dynamically shape their investment in learning English. The

interplay of gender, class, national policy, digital access, and sociopolitical ideologies highlights the complex, non-linear nature of language investment, demonstrating that learning English is not merely an individual choice, but a process embedded within broader systems of power, exclusion, and ideological control. These intersecting factors also reveal the fluidity of symbolic capital, the value of English as a resource is neither stable nor universally recognized, but shifts depending on sociopolitical context, institutional access, and ideological narratives. In some spaces, English is imbued with symbolic power as a tool of resistance, mobility, and modernity; in others, it is devalued or framed as a threat to cultural and religious identity.

To illustrate how these forces play out in lived experience, the following section presents the cases of two Afghan women: Fazana (pseudonym), interviewed prior to the return of the Taliban, and Samira (pseudonym), interviewed after the Taliban retook control of Afghanistan. Each interview took place online and in English and lasted approximately 45 minutes. The participants were former students of one of the researchers and were recruited as part of a larger study focusing on the experiences Afghanis have studying English. Their experiences underscore the intersectional conditions shaping their relationship with English and offer insight into how symbolic capital is gained, lost, or redefined in response to ideological and structural shifts.

4.1 Gender and language investment as resistance

Fazana and Samira's experiences underscore how a developing language identity is a site of struggle, where ideologies, power, and individual agency impact and are impacted by gender, institutional and social discourses, nationality, and religious concerns to shape language learning investment.

Both women's narratives reveal how restrictive gender ideologies position English as an undesirable investment for women, limiting their access to associated forms of capital and reinforcing traditional gender roles (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Gender ideologies, as socially constructed beliefs about gender roles and power relations, play a crucial role in shaping language learning opportunities and constraints (Ehrlich, 2014). These ideologies are neither static nor uniform; rather, they vary across contexts and interact with broader social structures such as class, race, and institutional power (Philips, 2014). Dominant gender ideologies often reinforce traditional roles by positioning men as rational and authoritative while relegating women to subordinate positions, limiting their access to linguistic capital (Philips, 2014). Such ideologies are not merely abstract beliefs but are embedded in discourse and politicized practices that dictate who can access language learning and under what conditions. In many contexts, including Fazana's, restrictive gender ideologies frame English as an inappropriate investment for women, thereby influencing both individual agency and investment in language learning. The way linguistic opportunities are distributed reflects not only individual motivation but also the underlying power dynamics that determine who is permitted to acquire and benefit from English (Darvin & Norton, 2015). By analysing these ideological structures, it becomes evident that language learning is not a neutral or purely educational endeavour but a socially contested space where gender, power, and access to linguistic resources intersect (Ehrlich, 2014; Philips, 2014).

Fazana mentions her experiences studying English prior to the return of the Taliban, a time when coalition forces were said to be reshaping the sociopolitical landscape across Afghanistan to encourage a more inclusive modern environment (Coleman, 2021). Her discussion of how her family actively tried to discourage her from investing in English despite supposed changes in policy that meant education was available to all suggests otherwise:

> *"Women couldn't get jobs, women couldn't come out from their home to learn something."*
>
> *"My cousins… they were living in a very small village. They didn't know anything. For this matter, they think that English is a foreign language that is not important, specifically a girl should not learn it."*

Despite this ideological resistance from some in her family, Fazana's investment in English became a form of gendered capital that she strategically deployed to claim social and economic mobility (Skeggs, 1997; Sung, 2023). Her access to linguistic knowledge and social power was being shaped by gendered hierarchies (Savignon, 2006), leading to the creation of gendered forms of capital, which draws from Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital, and refers to how different forms of capital, such as linguistic, cultural, and social capital, are distributed and valued differently based on gender norms and power structures. Male-dominated epistemologies have historically been controlled through dominant gender ideologies to determine who can acquire and benefit from these different forms of capital (Savignon, 2006).

From an applied linguistics perspective, women's access to capital may be systematically devalued or restricted, much like how their access to social and professional networks is shaped by gendered expectations (Ehrlich, 2014). This parallels how language learning opportunities are gendered, where women's access to English, for example, may be shaped by societal norms that either constrain or encourage their linguistic investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Operationalizing intersectionality within the investment model provides space for the critiques of power structures in applied linguistics to support the broader argument that capital, whether linguistic, cultural, or social, is never neutral, but also shaped by gender ideologies that privilege one gender over others.

Returning to Fazana's plight, acquiring English proficiency enabled her to resist gendered efforts to destabilize her acquired forms capital and gain employment in the banking sector, where English functioned as a form of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), which allowed her to carve a space within an economic domain that had previously been inaccessible to her:

> *"One of my goals was that I want to be a good teacher… I was very interested in English, specifically in speaking. When I faced words I didn't know, I worked hard to find their meanings."*
>
> *"I use English in my work… I work in a bank, so all the systems of banking are in English. It helps me."*

Fazana's investment in English thus represents a reconfiguration of gendered forms of capital, where English, initially framed as a symbol of cultural transgression, transforms into a valuable economic capital that challenges traditionalist ideologies while aligning with emerging modernist discourses of gender equity.

These narratives illustrate how gendered identity is both resisted and reconfigured through English. Initially positioned within a traditional female role that discouraged public education, they construct an identity aligned with professional aspiration and modernity. Their investment in English thus becomes a gendered act of identity reconstruction, challenging restrictive norms while acquiring new forms of capital.

4.2 Class and economic mobility: English as a gatekeeper to opportunity

Class intersects with gender-based restrictions significantly to impact access to English. In societies like Afghanistan, economic privilege can provide people, and especially women, with greater access to education, mobility, and alternative learning opportunities, while women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often face heightened gender restrictions due to financial limitations, societal expectations, and lack of institutional support (Coleman, 2021). Fazana's experience illustrates how class intersects with gendered constraints to influence her investment in language learning. Coming from a rural background where English education was inaccessible, her father's ability to relocate her to a city highlights how economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) can facilitate further capital acquisition, a privilege not afforded to all:

> *"I was living in a very small village. There was no one to help us learn English or encourage us. So, my father brought me to another city where there were courses, specifically English courses."*

Despite gendered restrictions discouraging women's English education, Fazana's investment in English was made possible through financial resources that allowed her to access urban educational institutions. This access ultimately translated into greater employment mobility, reinforcing the role of class in mediating economic capital through English:

> *"When I was in an exam for getting a job, I knew that English was very important, specifically for job opportunities. All the questions were in English. Because I knew English, I could answer them easily. That's when I understood the value of English."*

Samira, on the other hand, operates within post-Taliban restrictions, where women's exclusion from formal education significantly reduces their ability to invest in English. However, she is acutely aware that English remains a critical economic asset, particularly in private-sector employment, where English proficiency serves as a key gatekeeping mechanism. Yet, her ability to leverage this skill is shaped by class-based constraints, as lower-income women lack formal avenues for language acquisition, often having to rely on informal, self-directed learning:

> *"Last week, I went to a private school to be a teacher there. They said, 'How much do you know English?' In this situation, every office searches for people that know English. Only those who afford to learn English can benefit here"*

Samira's experience demonstrates how English proficiency is increasingly becoming an economic necessity rather than a luxury, yet access remains highly stratified. In urban and elite circles, English serves as a form of linguistic capital that grants access to privileged professional spaces, whereas for lower-income women, the ability to invest in English is precarious and contingent on alternative learning networks (Darvin & Norton, 2015).

Both Fazana and Samira's experiences reveal that English functions as both a tool for mobility and a mechanism for exclusion. English proficiency can serve as a determinant of social and economic mobility, opening doors to financial independence, yet access to English learning remains deeply unequal, stratified by class and geographic location. While urban, wealthier learners gain capital through formal education, rural and lower-income women must navigate informal and often unstable learning networks to achieve proficiency (Coleman, 2021; Noori et al., 2022). This reinforces existing gendered inequalities, as economic privilege dictates whether women can overcome restrictive policies to pursue their professional aspirations.

By positioning English as a classed and gendered resource, it opens up a view that investment in language learning is not simply an individual choice, but a product of intersecting ideological, institutional, and economic structures. In contexts like Afghanistan, where institutional policies restrict access to education for women, class serves as a key determinant in whether investment in English is viable or obstructed (Rabbidge & Zaheeb, 2023). This further demonstrates that English capital is not uniformly valuable but exists on a continuum, where its utility is shaped by one's class position, gender, and ability to navigate exclusionary social structures.

These cases illustrate how class-based access to English enables divergent identity trajectories. Fazana transitions from a rural learner to an urban professional, positioning herself through an identity of economic independence and institutional legitimacy. In contrast, Samira's working-class background limits her access to formal resources, shaping an identity grounded in resilience and limited recognition. These contrasting pathways underscore how symbolic capital is not only unevenly distributed but also differently activated across class lines.

4.3 Nationality, religion, and political control of language ideologies

The shaping of language ideologies in Afghanistan is deeply intertwined with nationalism, religious beliefs, and political power, reinforcing gender and class-based restrictions on access to English. As Darvin and Norton (2015) argue, language learning investment is not neutral, but rather shaped by who controls capital and how it is ideologically framed. In rural and conservative communities, English is often positioned as a foreign intrusion and perceived as a threat to Afghan and Islamic identity (Coleman, 2021; Qazi Zada & Qazi Zada, 2024). Fazana describes how this nationalist resistance restricts the ability of women to invest in English:

> *"Yes, of course there are so many people that didn't want [us to learn] English… because of some religious beliefs. In villages and in some cities far from Kabul, they believe that English is the language of foreigners and is not for students to learn."*

This rejection of English as foreign serves as a mechanism of cultural gatekeeping, reinforcing the idea that women, in particular, should uphold traditional values by avoiding Western influences (Qazi Zada & Qazi Zada, 2024). This form of linguistic nationalism disproportionately affects women, as they are often positioned as cultural preservers, reinforcing gendered exclusions from language acquisition.

Religious and nationalist ideologies often frame who is deemed morally or culturally 'permitted' to study English, privileging urban and elite learners whose class status grants them not only access, but a form of ideological insulation from accusations of cultural betrayal (Wani, 2024). Religious discourse is also deployed to police linguistic choices, reinforcing the idea that English is both morally and culturally inappropriate. Fazana recalls an incident where she was publicly shamed for speaking English, demonstrating how language use is surveilled and sanctioned through religious ideology:

> *"I went to the mall, and I mentioned a word, like, 'I should try it.' I wanted to buy something, and I told him, 'I should try it.' One of the English words I used was 'try,' and he told me, 'You are kafir (non-believer) or you're not Muslim because you use the language of foreigners.'"*

In this context, English is not just a form of capital but a politically charged symbol, where women's speech is regulated as part of a broader ideological apparatus (Sung, 2023). Wealthier women may have greater institutional protection and social support to resist such scrutiny, but lower-income women are more vulnerable to community enforcement of these norms.

Samira critiques the contradictions embedded in the Taliban's language policies, highlighting how political control of language ideologies is often selective and class based. While the Taliban publicly denounces English as a Western influence, they continue to use it in diplomatic and economic dealings, revealing how language control is deployed as a tool of ideological subjugation rather than genuine cultural resistance:

> *"As we see, the Taliban don't like English. But in some parts, they have contact with American persons, and in Afghanistan, they don't let the people learn English."*

The Taliban's inconsistent language policy illustrates how English is ideologically reframed depending on who uses it. For elites, it is a strategic tool for diplomacy; for marginalized groups, especially women, it is cast as morally suspect or culturally subversive. These contradictory stances expose how language policy operates less as uniform regulation and more as selective repression, reinforcing gendered and nationalist ideologies (Akbari & True, 2022). In this context, English becomes a symbolically charged battleground: women's attempts to learn or use it are often surveilled, sanctioned, or morally policed. Fazana and Samira's experiences show how access to English is not just about class but about navigating competing ideologies that mark English as both opportunity and threat (Qazi Zada & Qazi Zada, 2024).

Both women must navigate a national and religious discourse that attempts to fix their identities as guardians of tradition and cultural purity. Their use of English, however, constructs alternative identities

that align with global modernity and personal agency. The fluctuating legitimacy of English complicates these identity negotiations, forcing them to continuously adapt and rearticulate who they are in relation to shifting ideological boundaries.

4.4 Resistance through technology

Ideologies shift with the tides of power. With the Taliban's return, gendered, class and political restrictions on education and public life have intensified, yet Afghan women like Fazana and Samira respond not with retreat, but with innovation, constructing digital spaces to sustain their investment in English. Their use of social media and messaging platforms reflects not only resistance to structural exclusion but a negotiation of identity, capital, and power in a digital age. Samira, facing stricter post-Taliban barriers, turns to digital platforms to sustain her education. She reflects on this dynamic:

> *"We had that feeling because we can't go to university, but boys can go, and we can't follow our studies or learning… If one door closes to me, I switch to find another room… like my WhatsApp group that we have, I have an English class."*

Fazana similarly builds an international network to practice English, using Instagram and WhatsApp to bypass local restrictions and engage with speakers outside Afghanistan:

> *"I have two best friends from America and one from Brazil… I text with them all the time to improve my speaking."*

These narratives highlight how digital spaces become sites of alternative capital (Warriner, 2016), enabling marginalized learners to access linguistic, cultural, and social resources otherwise denied by formal institutions. Their strategic use of WhatsApp, Instagram, and other platforms represents a form of digital resistance (Ehrlich, 2014), where women reclaim educational agency and assert their right to participate in global linguistic economies.

Importantly, this form of resistance is shaped by overlapping axes of oppression. Fazana and Samira are not only resisting gendered prohibitions; they are also navigating political ideologies that frame English as a foreign intrusion and moral threat (Coleman, 2021). Their learning is thus not just academic, it is symbolic and ideological. English becomes both a tool of empowerment and a site of scrutiny, as learners must continuously negotiate the value, legitimacy, and risks of their investment.

As Norton (1997) reminds us, investment is never neutral. The digital sphere may offer new possibilities, but it is also a space of surveillance and instability. Internet access can be censored, monitored, or cut off entirely. Participation in online learning, particularly for women, invites moral judgment or community backlash. As Wani (2024) notes, digital resistance under Taliban rule is precarious: it offers hope, but also exposure.

Samira and Fazana embody this precarious agency. Their participation in online communities allows them to construct hybrid identities, at once restricted subjects of ideological repression and active agents of transnational engagement. Through their digital literacy, they align themselves with global imaginaries of mobility, modernity, and solidarity, even as they remain embedded in deeply localized systems of exclusion.

This complex interplay of constraints and resistance underscores the fluidity of symbolic capital. English does not hold a fixed or universal value in these contexts. For some, it is a currency of employability and cosmopolitanism, for others, a symbol of betrayal or religious impropriety. As such, English's worth shifts across time, space, and ideology, its capital status constantly negotiated through acts of identity work.

Fazana and Samira's digital learning, then, is not simply an act of defiance. It is an expression of complex, situated identity negotiation within intersecting regimes of power. By investing in English, they

resist erasure, reassert their presence, and disrupt the ideological boundaries that seek to define them. In doing so, they exemplify how marginalized individuals engage dynamically with shifting landscapes of opportunity, power, and symbolic value.

5 Rethinking Investment through Intersectionality Inspired Inclusive Practices

The experiences of Fazana and Samira underscore the complex, intersectional dynamics of investment in English learning, shaped by gender, class, nationalism, religion, and political control. Their narratives reveal that English functions not merely as a linguistic tool, but as a deeply contested site of power, where access, value, and legitimacy are negotiated through structural inequalities and individual agency. Darvin and Norton's (2015) Model of Investment remains a powerful framework for analysing these tensions, but Fazana and Samira's cases also challenge us to extend the model's boundaries to better engage with emerging sociopolitical realities in an ideologically charged world.

One of the most pressing implications emerging from this then is the urgent need for decolonial approaches education, particularly in contexts where language learning is tied to geopolitical struggles and ideological gatekeeping. English is often framed as both an asset and a threat, reflecting broader anxieties about cultural preservation, Western influence, and global hierarchies of power (Pennycook & Makoni, 2019). Educators and policymakers must recognize the ways in which English is weaponized as both an exclusionary tool and a mechanism of social mobility, and work toward pedagogical approaches that resist linguistic imperialism while affirming learners' agency. This aligns with Darvin and Zhang (2023), who argue that decolonizing language learning requires reconfiguring power structures in the classroom, allowing learners to position themselves as knowledge producers rather than passive recipients of English instruction. This means acknowledging the ideological dimensions of English learning and developing curricula that foreground learners' lived realities, particularly how they navigate conflicting discourses of tradition, modernity, resistance, and aspiration. Rather than assuming that English is always imposed as a Western norm, a decolonial approach recognizes how learners actively negotiate its meaning within local ideological struggles, including those that frame English as both a threat to cultural identity and a pathway to opportunity. In this context, decolonizing TESOL involves shifting away from universalized norms of English use and instead centring the voices, strategies, and contextual realities of learners themselves (Pennycook & Makoni, 2019).

Furthermore, there is a need for inclusive practices that address structural inequalities in access to language learning. Class-based disparities in access to English education—whether through formal schooling, private institutions, or digital networks—must be actively addressed in educational policies. Rural and lower-income learners, particularly women, often face multiple layers of exclusion, ranging from financial barriers and digital illiteracy to ideological policing of their linguistic choices (Akbari & True, 2022; Qazi Zada & Qazi Zada, 2024). Educators and policymakers should advocate for expanded access to low-cost or community-driven English education, including mobile-based learning platforms that accommodate restricted digital environments. However, digital learning is not a universally accessible solution, as Darvin and Zhang (2023) highlight, access to online learning remains deeply stratified by financial privilege, with urban, wealthier learners benefiting from technological resources while rural and lower-income students struggle with connectivity and digital infrastructure. Similarly, in Afghanistan, access to mobile devices, stable internet, and unrestricted learning platforms determines who can continue engaging with English through digital spaces.

Additionally, there is a need for a critical re-evaluation of how to conceptualize resistance and agency. Fazana and Samira's cases illustrate that investment in English is not always an autonomous, freely chosen act, but rather a highly precarious negotiation within sociopolitical constraints. Pedagogy must account for these tensions, incorporating translanguaging and community-based approaches that allow learners to navigate and reclaim linguistic spaces on their own terms. Instead of limiting the positioning

of English as an ideologically neutral global language or oppressor of minority languages, educators must engage students in critical discussions about language ideologies, power, and access, ensuring that their learning experiences reflect their sociopolitical contexts and aspirations.

Ultimately, this work affirms the enduring relevance of the Model of Investment, demonstrating its ability to uncover the multilayered struggles embedded in language learning. However, Fazana and Samira's experiences also push the model beyond its traditional scope, demanding that we engage more deeply with the geopolitical, ideological, and technological realities that shape investment in English today. By adopting decolonial and inclusive approaches, we can move toward a more just, critically engaged language pedagogy, one that truly centres the voices and experiences of learners navigating complex, contested linguistic landscapes.

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Michael Rabbidge is a Senior Lecturer in the Division of Education at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. His research interests focus on sociolinguistics, language policy, and the intersections of identity, ideology, and investment in language education. He has published on the impact of sociopolitical dynamics on language learning, particularly in contexts of instability and globalization. Drawing on both qualitative and critical approaches, his work contributes to understanding how linguistic capital and identity are negotiated in multilingual and transnational spaces. Michael's teaching emphasizes fostering inclusive and equitable practices in TESOL and multilingual education.

Abdul Saboor Zaheeb is a PhD candidate in the TESOL department at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul, South Korea. His various developing research interests include language identity, language ideologies, EFL learners' attitudes and motivation, and the sociopolitical challenges and pedagogical developments shaping English language teaching (ELT) in Afghanistan.