International Journal of TESOL Studies (2025)
Vol. 7 (4) 194-198 https://doi.org/10.58304/ijts.251126

Epilogue

Investing Across Online and Offline Spaces and the Negotiation of Embodied and Imagined Identities

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1 Introduction

The articles gathered in this special issue vividly demonstrate how the model of investment has been mobilized to interrogate both online and offline spaces, and how the act of investing in discursive practices is always contextualized, situated, and contingent. Whether learners configure their engagement amidst AI-mediated "digital wilds," in bilingual preschool classrooms, elite universities, or constrained sociopolitical landscapes, investment emerges as a dynamic, emergent process negotiated through shifting relations of power. In online arenas, Liao and colleagues (this issue) show how AI-mediated informal digital learning of English (IDLE) practices foster autonomy and the right to speak (Norton, 1995) for learners who strategically mobilize digital tools beyond classrooms, while foregrounding macro-level policy frameworks such as the expansion of EMI that shape those practices. Investigating the context of Afghanistan, Rabbidge and Zaheeb (this issue) trace how social networks and platforms become alternative pathways for acquiring and translating symbolic capital under conditions of ideological policing and infrastructural precarity, yet with an always contingent legitimacy that shifts with political narratives.

Offline, Yazıcı and Dikilitaş (this issue) document how translanguaging-driven professional development (PD) repositions co-teachers and reorganizes classroom authority, while Guan's (this issue) 13-month ethnography at a Shanghai liberal arts college reveals how classed and gendered identities pattern access and commitment to EFL practices. Across these diverse studies spanning Hong Kong novice teachers negotiating GenAI literacies, Chinese university lecturers returning to doctoral study, and an autoethnographic account of translanguaging as decolonial method, the time scale also varies: some studies capture rapid, short-term reconfigurations e.g., technology adoption, PD-induced shifts, while others trace longer arcs of identity and capital negotiation. Crucially, the point is not that one time scale is better; rather, it is that these temporalities are analytically braided. Micro-interactions index macro-processes: an anxious click, a translanguaging move, or a mentoring exchange condenses the preoccupations of wider society e.g., credentialism, gender normativity, ideological control, and makes them legible in the moment. Systemic patterns of control which learners negotiate in different situations shape how they invest in learning in continually shifting ways.

What follows elaborates three cross-cutting themes evident across the nine pieces: (1) identity as embodied and imagined, structured across time and space while oriented to futures; (2) resources/capital as unevenly distributed, yet open to reframing through agentive negotiation; and (3) ideology as embedded across offline, online, and human–AI interactions, where struggles over legitimacy and value become sites of competing agencies. I conclude by arguing for the analytic and pedagogical value of

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"invest" as a verb, foregrounding the continuous, situated activity of becoming, especially in a world where online/offline boundaries have eroded and where patterns of control increasingly operate in invisible ways.

2 Identity as Embodied, Intersectional, and Imagined

In these articles, identity is not limited to the categories inscribed on the body: race, gender, or social class. It is also narrated across time and oriented toward what learners and teachers might yet become. Identity is always shifting across time and space, continually (re)constructed through agency and interaction, and bound to the capital that one possesses and that one desires. Truong (this issue) draws on the notion of sponsorscapes to examine how identity work unfolds within a network of invisible forces that enable or impede life trajectories. Intersecting identity dimensions surface powerfully in Guan's (this issue) ethnography, where class positions both enable and constrain, and gender discourses calibrate the value of language learning itself. Through long-term observation, Guan shows that language learning investment functions as a "site of power dynamics among intersecting social forces," a formulation that crystallizes how individual choices (writing a thesis, securing an internship) index macro-struggles over class reproduction and gender normativity.

In professional contexts, Bao's (this issue) narrative case study illuminates identity as imagined: in-service TESOL lecturers pursue doctorates to reframe who they are and who they can be, even when immediate research outputs, the capital most highly valued by audit cultures, are not forthcoming. One participant leverages the doctoral title's symbolic capital to secure a "safe space" for continued development; another strengthens a teacher identity by reshaping courses with research-informed rigor. Across both trajectories, imagined identities of researcher or lecturer anchor their choice to invest in learning. While they can be positioned in different ways in the present, it is their desire to hold a legitimate place in imagined communities that maintains their investment. Yazıcı and Dikilitaş (this issue) similarly illustrate the process of becoming through practice: as co-teachers engage in translanguaging PD, Turkish-speaking homeroom teachers gain "authority, autonomy, and visibility," moving from assistant roles toward bilingual teacher identities, while English teachers decenter themselves and re-imagine their authority as collaborative. The value of their capital is layered rather than monolithic, continually negotiated in relation to shifting institutional ideologies. Yang's poetic autoethnography rounds out this perspective by positioning critical translanguaging as decolonial identity work that challenges colonial hierarchies of language and values plural perspectives. Through a braided method of personal narrative, fieldnotes, and critical reflection, Yang shows how pedagogical choices recalibrate how learners' and teachers invest in particular identities and discourses, pointing toward futures where creative agency and plural knowledge practices are legitimized.

Two further pieces situated at the interface of teacher identity and GenAI, Teng & Yip (this issue) and Zhang & Dikilitaş (this issue) concur that identity is actively reconstructed in digital contexts. Teng and Yip capture the shift from instructors to "curators of machine-mediated learning," a phrase that crystallizes both the anxiety and opportunity of rearticulated professional selves. Zhang and Dikilitaş build a conceptual link between investment and critical digital literacies (CDL), documenting how two novice teachers negotiate identities within the ideological spaces of current and imagined teacher communities. Across these nine contributions, identity is not merely who one is here and now, but also who they can be: the multiple imagined identities that shape the way they invest in their learning.

3 Capital as Negotiated and Unevenly Distributed

If identity connects the temporal arc of becoming, capital gives it traction and friction. The uneven distribution of material, social, cultural, linguistic, and semiotic resources is a pervasive theme, yet the

studies also demonstrate how learners and teachers negotiate, convert, and reframe available resources as they invest in their learning. Liao and colleagues (this issue) show how AI-mediated IDLE expands access to L2 practice by recentering informal, interest-driven engagement. This is not a frictionless solution: learners still require institutional support and ethical guidelines to leverage the promise of AI tools, and educators need to consider the consequences of unequal access to devices, literacies, and networks. Zhang and Dikilitaş extend the lens of capital to GenAI-mediated teacher learning where novice teachers acquire varying levels of material and symbolic resources (e.g., institutional access to AI, peer support, critical literacies) and require designed ecosystems to enact GenAI-CDL practices Guan's (this issue) ethnography likewise shows how social class and gender produce asymmetric access to valued practices and resources, but also how learners exercise agency by embracing or resisting gendered scripts of language learning, mobilizing peer networks, and experimenting with genres, to renegotiate the terms of participation.

In Rabbidge and Zaheeb's (this issue) study, Afghanistan offers a stark illustration of the politics of value. In this context, the shifting value of capital is an everyday risk calculus: English proficiency can signal modernity and confer employment opportunities in some spaces, while being stigmatized as cultural betrayal in others. Social media and messaging platforms do create alternative channels for learning and affiliation, particularly for women; yet connectivity gaps and ideological surveillance render those channels unstable and uneven. In the Chinese higher-education sector, Bao (this issue) details how neoliberal audit regimes shape the value of capital, especially as symbolic recognition is always mediated by institutional metrics. Yet, the study insists, pathways to capital are not linear: participants recalibrate expectations, leverage existing social and cultural resources (e.g., insider knowledge, networks), and sometimes prioritize symbolic certification (the degree) to secure time and space for future research productivity. Yazıcı and Dikilitaş (this issue) make a critical contribution by showing how PD can help teachers value their linguistic and pedagogical resources as capital. Through "shared responsibility" in planning and instruction, co-teachers develop new capital and reconfigure symbolic authority, altering the distribution of legitimate voice in the classroom. Taken together, these studies push us to see capital less as about what learners have and more as what they can make of what they have, with others, in institutions, and against shifting ideological tides.

4 Ideology and the Entanglements of Offline/Online/Human–AI Interactions

Across the special issue, ideology is treated not as a static worldview but as an evolving site of struggle that saturates practice. Teng and Yip (this issue) situate GenAI's rise as a tool that can destabilize professional identity and a prompt to revisit how institutional discourses structure legitimacy, participation, and authority in EFL writing. Through narrative inquiry, they demonstrate how AI's insertion into assessment, feedback, and planning refracts the tensions of humanism vs. automation, and competing agencies. Zhang and Dikilitaş (this issue) point out how GenAI use is never neutral; it is always entangled with beliefs about ethics, authorship, and pedagogical purpose. Yazıcı and Dikilitaş (this issue), in turn, demonstrate how translanguaging unsettles monolingual ideologies by rendering visible the layered valuation of linguistic resources. As teachers gain access to pedagogical resources (co-teaching repertoires, joint planning tools), their language beliefs shift from monolithic to heteroglossic. For Liao and colleagues, the ideological terrain is split across formal and informal spaces. While IDLE, especially AI-mediated IDLE, expands learning opportunities, it also inherits the ideological projects embedded in platforms and institutional policies (e.g., EMI), which one must ethically navigate.

Rabbidge and Zaheeb (this issue) pursue ideology on two scales at once: neoliberal framings that recast education as skills acquisition for competitive markets, and localized ideological regimes that police language learning as cultural threat. From this vantage, online education and critical literacy initiatives both promise and constrain; their uptake is mediated by class, gender, and surveillance, further

underscoring how the value of one's capital fluctuates across sociopolitical contexts. Yang's (this issue) decolonial translanguaging pushes the ideological analysis inward, asking teachers to interrogate not only the ideologies that circulate in institutions but also those sedimented in their own pedagogical habits. Truong (this issue) underscores how ideology saturates the very conditions under which TESOL professionals can mobilize capital and exercise agency, and that dis/investment is not always an agentive choice, but can be the consequence of navigating hegemonic discourses and institutional scripts. Across these contributions, ideology is not an external backdrop; it lives in prompts typed into AI, in lesson-planning meetings, in admissions policies, and in the language through which teachers and learners articulate their imagined communities.

5 Investing as a Continually Shifting Process

By demonstrating how learners actively negotiate identity, capital and ideology across online and offline spaces, the nine articles in this special issue collectively demonstrate that investment is a continually shifting process. It is best operationalized as a verb (to invest) rather than reified into a static noun (investment), to assert how it is a sociopolitical act that unfolds across historical and material structures, and through the active negotiation of relations of power. As learners move through classrooms, bureaucracies, social media feeds, and GenAI chats, there are patterns of control that may be opaque or invisible, and the increasing erosion of online/offline boundaries intensifies this invisibility. What appears online as autonomous practice is entangled with offline policies, institutional practices, and social imaginaries. Teng and Yip's (this issue) EFL writing ecology underscores this point: professional identities are being reorganized around GenAI affordances and constraints, as teachers practice attention, care, and judgment that become legible across both the human–human and human–AI interface. The model of investment serves as a lens to make visible the entanglements of bodies, artefacts, and discourse, and the patterns of control that shape them (Darvin, 2025).

Recognizing the act of investing as an ongoing process keeps us attentive to the desires that shape our investment. Investment is not only about acquiring convertible capital; it must also interrogate the desirability of particular capital, asking who and what it is designed to serve. Bao's (this issue) study makes this tension palpable: participants navigate a metrics-driven field, sometimes reorienting away from research outputs toward symbolic certification or pedagogical redesign in order to secure some breathing room. The question is not only about how to enact "the rules of the game" but also why this game is being played and to what ends.

What, then, does this special issue collectively propose? First, identity must be analyzed as embodied and intersectional, yet also as imagined and future-oriented. Learners and teachers are not simply constrained by structures of power, they orient to possible futures and invest in discursive practices that enable them to achieve such futures. Second, resources are unevenly distributed, but the point is not to romanticize resilience, but to expand possibilities—PD programs, doctoral trajectories, peer networks, ethical IDLE infrastructures—through which actors can reframe capital in ways that expand their agency. Third, ideology permeates both the online and the offline, and increasingly, human–AI interactions. Researching investment requires that we treat prompts, platforms, and policies as co-constitutive sites of struggle, where the value of practices and identities is continuously contested. From this vantage, the call to prefer invest (verb) over investment (noun) is more than stylistic. It foregrounds the continuous, situated movement of learners and teachers through institutions, platforms, and publics; it centers the *sens pratique* or practical sense (Darvin & Norton, 2015) required to navigate invisible patterns of control; and it opens the question of ends—what futures are we investing in? As learners and teachers invest in diverse language and literacy practices, they must reflect on not only the futures they imagine for themselves, but also how those futures might contribute to more equitable, inclusive, and just futures for others.

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