

## Language, Power, and Identity in TESOL and beyond: Celebrating Ten Years of Darwin and Norton's (2015) Model of Investment

**Guangxiang Leon Liu\***

Southeast University, China

**Yue Zhang**

The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China

**Mark Feng Teng**

Macao Polytechnic University, Macau SAR, China

### 1 Introduction

When Bonny Norton (1995) first introduced the notion of *investment* in *TESOL Quarterly*, she shifted the field's understanding of why learners engage in language and literacy practices. Rejecting the narrow psychological framing of motivation, Norton proposed *investment* to capture how language learners, as social beings with complex and historically situated identities, participate in language and literacy practices when they perceive such engagement with the target language as a pathway to expanding their symbolic and material resources. Through investment, learners seek to accumulate forms of capital and claim legitimacy as a language learner or speaker, yet their degree of investment depends on how power operates within particular contexts and on whether they are granted or denied the right to speak (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013).

Two decades later, Darwin and Norton (2015) revisited this notion in light of globalization and digitalization. Observing how time-space compression, technological connectivity, and privatized forms of isolation were reshaping people's lives, they extended the theory by locating investment at the intersection of identity, capital, and ideology. From a poststructuralist perspective that contests fixed identity binaries such as *male/female* or *motivated/unmotivated*, identity was understood as multiple, fluid, and continually negotiated (Norton, 2013). Drawing on Bourdieu (1991), Darwin and Norton emphasized *capital* as power manifesting in economic ("what one has"), cultural ("what one knows"), and social ("who one knows") forms, or resources that learners mobilize to assert legitimacy across social spaces. The third construct, *ideology*, highlights how power operates invisibly through dominant beliefs and norms that shape access, inclusion, and exclusion in language learning (Darvin & Norton, 2016, 2023). In an era of intensified global mobility and digital mediation, individuals must constantly negotiate competing ideologies that influence the perceived value of their linguistic and semiotic capital. To be invested in language and literacy practices, learners exercise agency by assembling their linguistic, cultural, and digital resources while claiming legitimate speakership within these ideologically charged spaces (Darvin, 2025b).

---

\*Corresponding author. Email: [g.liu@link.cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:g.liu@link.cuhk.edu.hk)

During the past decade, the model of investment has inspired a rich body of scholarship across continents, demonstrating its theoretical versatility and empirical depth. In **African** contexts, researchers have applied the framework to examine how teachers and learners navigate postcolonial language hierarchies, ranging from the *African Storybook* digital literacy project in rural Uganda (Stranger-Johannessen & Norton, 2019) to the revitalization of indigenous languages in post-apartheid South Africa (James, 2022). Across **Asia**, the model has proven equally productive. It has been applied to unpack critical digital literacies of learners in the context of emerging technologies (Liu, 2023; Liu et al., 2025), heritage-language teacher identity and agency in Bangladesh (Afreen & Norton, 2022), the empowerment of English learners from rural China (Liu, 2025; Liu & Darvin, 2024), and English-teacher identity formation (Zhang, 2024; Zhang & Huang, 2024; Zhang & Darvin, 2025). Other studies from Hong Kong illustrate how learners and educators engage in decolonial practices through YouTube production and critical pedagogy (Darvin & Zhang, 2023; Zhang & Gonzales, 2024). In **Europe**, the model has guided research on immigrant learners' investments in both majority and heritage language maintenance (Ikkänen, 2022), while studies in **North America** (Crowther, 2020) and **Australia** (Gilanyi, 2019) have shown how transnational students draw on multilingual repertoires to negotiate belonging in everyday literacy practices.

This worldwide engagement affirms the model's strength as a heuristic for understanding how language learning is always situated within relations of power, identity, and ideology. It has encouraged educators to move beyond psychological explanations of effort or motivation toward more critical inquiries into how structural inequalities and symbolic hierarchies condition learners' access to resources and decision to participate in learning as social practice. Moreover, it has provided practitioners and policymakers with insights for designing inclusive pedagogies that recognize learners' diverse identities, validate their voices, and challenge deficit ideological discourses.

At the same time, the past decade has witnessed rapid sociotechnical and geopolitical shifts that invite renewed theorization. The proliferation of digital media and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies has opened up new contexts where language, literacy, and meaning intertwine with each other in a complicated manner (Soyoo et al., 2025). Such a reality invites researchers to not only examine the nexus of capital and identity in neoliberal discourses but also to disclose the emergent ideologies embedded in platforms and algorithms. Questions of intersectionality have also come to the fore: gender, class, ethnicity, and migration intersect to shape the contours of learners' investments in different settings. Methodologically, the study of investment has diversified from ethnographic and narrative traditions to multimodal discourse analysis and longitudinal case studies, capturing how agency and identity evolve across time and space (Darvin, 2025a).

These developments showcase that the model of investment is not a static theoretical artifact but a living framework that continues to adapt to the changing conditions of language learning and teaching as well as professional communication. It enables us to see learners not merely as recipients of instruction but as socially positioned agents navigating unequal worlds of power and possibility. As we mark its tenth anniversary, we celebrate how Darvin and Norton's model has expanded the conceptual boundaries of language, power, and identity, while offering enduring guidance for those committed to equity and transformation in TESOL and beyond.

## 2 Articles in the Special Issue

This special issue features nine articles that mark a vibrant decade of theoretical expansion and empirical innovation inspired by the model of investment. The contributions span a wide spectrum of contexts and concerns, reflecting the dynamic ways in which identity, capital, and ideology continue to shape language learning and teaching in the third decade of the twenty-first century. Several articles explore how generative AI and digital technologies reshape teachers' and learners' professional practices, while others examine how social class, gender, and ideology intersect to influence learners' right to speak and

be heard as legitimate English speakers. The issue also foregrounds translanguaging and decolonial practices as powerful means of fostering agency and equity in multilingual classrooms, alongside studies that highlight professional development, informal digital learning, and researchers' autoethnographical reflections within diverse TESOL communities. Together, these works attest to the enduring relevance of the model of investment while envisioning new possibilities for theorizing identity and power in an increasingly complex and ever-changing world.

**Yue Zhang and Kenan Dikilitaş's (2025)** multiple-case study investigates how two novice English language teachers in Hong Kong develop critical digital literacies involving generative AI (GenAI) as part of their professional identity formation. Drawing on Darwin and Norton's (2015) model of investment and the framework of critical digital literacies (Darvin, *in press*), the study conceptualizes novice teachers' engagement with GenAI as an act of investment shaped by identity, capital, and ideology. Through in-depth interviews and artifact analysis, the study reveals how teachers from different sociocultural and educational backgrounds navigate GenAI-mediated learning-to-teach practices, negotiating tensions between institutional expectations and personal beliefs about technology and pedagogy. The findings show that access to material, cultural, and social resources significantly influences the extent to which novice teachers critically engage with GenAI, while ideological discourses within their institutions determine the legitimacy of GenAI use in teaching. Zhang and Dikilitaş propose a conceptual model linking the constructs of investment and critical digital literacies, arguing that teacher education should prioritize critical awareness of GenAI's embedded ideologies and power structures. The study underscores the need for teacher education programs to integrate GenAI literacy as a core pedagogical goal, fostering teachers' capacity to engage with GenAI critically, ethically, and reflectively in diverse educational contexts.

**Jie Bao's (2025)** narrative case study investigates how two Chinese TESOL lecturers negotiate their professional identities and legitimacy through investment in further doctoral learning. Drawing on Darwin and Norton's (2015) model of investment, the study conceptualizes teachers' investment in doctoral education as a socially mediated process shaped by ideology, identity, and capital rather than individual motivation. Through rich narratives, the study illustrates how the participants, navigating tensions between institutional expectations and personal aspirations, exercised agency to reconfigure their professional trajectories. For one participant, the doctorate functioned as symbolic capital that secured legitimacy and opened future possibilities for research participation, while for the other, doctoral study reinforced a teaching-oriented identity and empowered him to claim authority over pedagogical practice. Bao's analysis foregrounds the complexities of how teachers convert and negotiate capital under neoliberal, metrics-driven ideologies in higher education and demonstrates that doctoral learning serves as both a site of struggle and empowerment for TESOL professionals seeking legitimacy within academic hierarchies.

**Jingjing Guan's (2025)** ethnographic case study, explores how Chinese EFL learners' social class and gendered identities intersect to shape their investment in English learning at an elite liberal-arts college in Shanghai. Drawing on the model of investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015) and intersectionality theory (Block & Corona, 2016), the 13-month longitudinal inquiry reveals that social class functions simultaneously as a resource and a constraint on learners' engagement with English, while gendered perceptions influence the intensity and direction of their commitment to English learning. Guan's analysis demonstrates how these identity dimensions intertwine to structure access to linguistic capital and legitimate speakership, positioning language learning as a site where social power is both reproduced and contested. The study also highlights a call for critical pedagogical approaches that acknowledge structural inequalities and foster feminist consciousness, thereby advancing more equitable EFL learning environments.

**Sam Junwei Liao, Fan Fang, Xiao Cao, and Wenjun Wang's (2025)** single-case study investigates how a first-year undergraduate in a Chinese English-medium instruction (EMI) university invests in informal digital learning of English (IDLE) and academic subject learning through digital

resources, including AI tools. Drawing on Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment, the study examines how the learner's ideologies, identity, and capital interact within the EMI environment to shape her participation in IDLE and AI-mediated learning. Through semi-structured interviews and qualitative thematic analysis, the study reveals that the participant's positive attitudes toward English and technology, her identity as a strategically motivated long-term English learner, and her economic, social, and cultural capital collectively underpin her sustained investment. While AI tools enhanced her efficiency and confidence, concerns about academic integrity and limited private learning space constrained her engagement. The study highlights the transformative potential of IDLE in bridging formal and informal learning spaces within EMI settings and underscores the need for institutional guidance and ethical frameworks to support equitable and responsible AI-mediated learning.

**Mark Feng Teng** and **Jesse W. C. Yip's** (2025) narrative inquiry investigates how Chinese EFL teachers negotiate their professional identities in response to the growing integration of GenAI in university writing instruction in China. Grounded in Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment, the study examines how institutional resources, emotional labor, and technological access shape teachers' identity work and engagement with GenAI. Drawing on narratives from six university English instructors, the study reveals how participants manage ideological tensions surrounding GenAI use, particularly the balance between innovation and the perceived erosion of critical thinking. Teng and Yip identify two emergent identity positions: that of the "worrier," who resists GenAI's encroachment on pedagogical values, and the "warrior," who actively appropriates the technology to enhance efficiency and reassert professional agency. Their analysis underscores that GenAI not only reconfigures teachers' access to capital but also reshapes the ideological terrain of language education, calling for professional development that integrates both technical competence and critical reflection on identity transformation.

**Michael Rabbidge** and **Abdul Saboor Zaheeb's** (2025) article revisits Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment amid intensifying global precarity and ideological conflict. Drawing on the narratives of two Afghan female English learners before and after the Taliban's return, the authors illustrate how investment in English simultaneously represents empowerment and risk. Their analysis reveals that symbolic capital is highly fluid and context-dependent: while English serves as a resource for social mobility and resistance in urban spaces, it becomes a site of vulnerability and transgression under restrictive sociopolitical regimes. By situating learners' experiences within intersecting structures of gender, class, and ideology, the authors underscore how capital's value and convertibility are never stable but constantly reshaped by power relations. Rabbidge and Zaheeb ultimately call for a reconceptualization of the model that accounts for these dynamic sociopolitical contingencies and promotes decolonial, context-sensitive TESOL practices that affirm learners' agency amid constraint.

**Shizhou Yang's** (2025) poetic autoethnography explores the interconnections among identity, investment, and ideology through a deeply personal and reflexive lens. Informed by Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of investment and situated within a decolonial framework of translanguaging, the study reimagines how TESOL professionals can construct agency and legitimacy through critical translanguaging. Drawing on autobiographical narratives, classroom fieldnotes, and an interview conducted by a former student, Yang traces how pedagogical practices can either reproduce or challenge dominant language ideologies that shape teachers' and learners' investments in particular identities. By weaving creative expression with scholarly reflection, the study positions poetic autoethnography as a critical methodology that foregrounds emotion, embodiment, and multiplicity in the study of professional identity. Yang argues that translanguaging, when enacted critically, becomes a form of resistance that validates multilingual repertoires and dismantles colonial hierarchies of language and knowledge. This work calls for a more humanizing and transformative understanding of identity and investment in TESOL, one that embraces the fluidity, creativity, and political significance of multilingual experience.

**Elif Aydın Yazıcı** and **Kenan Dikilitaş's** (2025) longitudinal ethnographic study examines how pairs of co-teachers in a bilingual preschool in Türkiye negotiated and redefined their professional identities

through translanguaging pedagogy. Grounded in Darwin and Norton's (2015) model of investment, the study conceptualizes translanguaging as a pedagogical investment through which teachers reposition themselves amid shifting classroom ideologies and power relations. Drawing on data from in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and reflective journals, the research traces how sustained participation in a professional development program encouraged teachers to collaboratively plan, teach, and reflect within a translanguaging framework. Over time, Turkish-speaking homeroom teachers, initially positioned as assistants, gained confidence, authority, and visibility, while English teachers came to view their roles as shared and dialogic rather than hierarchical. Yazıcı and Dikilitaş demonstrate that translanguaging pedagogy not only transforms classroom interactional dynamics but also reshapes teachers' professional identities, fostering more equitable and agentic forms of bilingual teacherhood in early childhood education.

**Khoa Dang Truong, Huy-Hoang Huynh, and Quyen Tran's** (2025) collaborative autoethnography investigates how Vietnamese TESOL professionals negotiate their research identities and investments within the ideological and institutional landscapes of higher education. Drawing on Darwin and Norton's (2015) model of investment and the concept of sponsorscapes, the study examines how social networks, institutional discourses, and familial expectations function as sponsors that shape the participants' access to capital and their orientation toward research. Through collaborative reflection and narrative inquiry, the authors reveal how their investment in research is sustained by both ideal identities, anchored in professional aspiration and community recognition, and ought-to identities driven by socio-educational and familial ideologies. The analysis highlights how symbolic, cultural, and economic capital are mobilized within sponsorscapes of support, reflecting the influences of both neoliberal academic demands and traditional value systems. The authors argue that understanding research investment through these intersecting sponsorscapes not only extends the theoretical scope of the investment model but also offers practical insights for fostering equitable, research-oriented professional development in TESOL.

### 3 Looking Forward: A Decade of Dialogue

As we mark a decade since the publication of Darwin and Norton's (2015) model, this special issue is both a celebration and an invitation. It celebrates the model's enduring influence in reframing how we understand language learning as a socially and ideologically situated practice. At the same time, it invites us to confront new configurations of power, precarity, and privilege that shape learners' investments in a rapidly changing world.

The enduring relevance of the model lies in its generativity. It is not a closed system but an open invitation to theorize anew and to bring together emerging phenomena such as AI and affective labor into our understanding of language, identity, and power. In this sense, the investment model continues to operate as a critical compass that orients researchers and educators toward more inclusive and reflexive practices.

We hope this special issue reaffirms the model's legacy while inspiring new dialogues that extend its reach into the next decade. In doing so, we join Darwin and Norton (2015, 2023) in recognizing that investment is not merely about language learning: it is about the ongoing struggle for voice, visibility, and legitimacy in an unequal world.

### References

- Afreen, A. & Norton, B. (2022). Bangla and the identity of the heritage language teacher. *Educational Linguistics*, 1(1), 152-178. <https://doi.org/10.1515/eduling-2021-0008>

- Bao, J. (2025). Claiming legitimacy in the academic field: Chinese university TESOL lecturers' investment in doctoral learning. *International Journal of TESOL Studies*, 250627, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.58304/ijts.250627>
- Block, D., & Corona, V. (2016). Intersectionality in language and identity research. In S. Preece (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of language and identity* (pp. 507-522). Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Harvard University Press.
- Crowther, D. (2020). Language investment during university adjustment: The divergent path of two international Chinese freshmen. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 19(4), 275-289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2019.1672075>
- Darvin, R. (in press). Critical digital literacies. In W.S.E. Lam & R. Darvin (Eds.). *Literacy*. In C. Chapelle (Gen. Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*. Wiley.
- Darvin, R. (2025a). Identity and investment in the age of generative AI. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190525100135>
- Darvin, R. (2025b). Platformization, social media, and the negotiation of inequalities. *Applied Linguistics Review*.
- Darvin, R., & Norton, B. (2015). Identity and a model of investment in language learning. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 35, 36–56. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190514000191>
- Darvin, R., & Norton, B. (2016). Investment and language learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Language & society*, (3), 19-38. <https://doi.org/10.3917/ls.157.0019>
- Darvin, R., & Norton, B. (2023). Investment and motivation in language learning: What's the difference? *Language Teaching*, 56(1), 29–40. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444821000057>
- Darvin, R., & Zhang, Y. (2023). Words that don't translate: Investing in decolonizing practices through translanguaging. *Language Awareness*, 32(4), 645-661. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2023.2238595>
- Dikilitaş, K., & Yazıcı, E. A. (2025). Translanguaging as a pedagogical investment: A poststructural perspective on identity development. *International Journal of TESOL Studies*, 250803, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.58304/ijts.250803>
- Gilanyi, L. (2019). *Transnational sojourners' investment in learning English: a multi-case study of partners of international students in Australia* (Doctoral dissertation, UNSW Sydney). <https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/22058>
- Guan, J. J. (2025). Investment in intersecting identities: Negotiating social class and gendered identities in English language learning. *International Journal of TESOL Studies*, 250903, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.58304/ijts.250903>
- Iikkanen, P. (2022). Migrant women, work, and investment in language learning: Two success stories. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 13(4), 545-571. <https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2019-0052>
- James, M. W. (2022). *L2 Investment in African languages: a multiple case study of successful white learners of African languages in post-apartheid South Africa* [Apollo - University of Cambridge Repository]. <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.96337>
- Liao, S. J., Fang, F., Cao, X., & Wang, W. J. (2025). “Almost like having my own teacher beside me”: A learner's investment in Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) and English-medium Instruction (EMI) learning. *International Journal of TESOL Studies*, 250712, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.58304/ijts.250712>
- Liu, G. (2023). Interrogating critical digital literacies in the Chinese context: insights from an ethnographic case study. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2023.2241859>
- Liu, G. L. (2025). Digital empowerment for rural migrant students in China: Identity, investment, and digital literacies beyond the classroom. *ReCALL*, 37(2), 215-231. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344024000302>

- Liu, G., & Darwin, R. (2024). From rural China to the digital wilds: Negotiating digital repertoires to claim the right to speak online. *TESOL Quarterly*, 58(1), 334-362. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444821000057>
- Liu, G. L., Lee, J. S., Zhao, X. (2025). Critical digital literacies, agentic practices, and AI-mediated informal digital learning of English. *System*, 103797. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2025.103797>
- Norton, B. (2013). *Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation* (2nd ed.). Bristol: Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783090563>
- Norton Peirce, B. (1995). Social Identity, investment and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(1), 9–31. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587803>
- Rabbidge, M., & Zaheeb, A. S. (2025). Evolving landscapes of investment: Revisiting the model of investment in the face of sociopolitical shifts. *International Journal of TESOL Studies*, 250710, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.58304/ijts.250710>
- Soyoof, A., Gee, J. P., & Liu, G. L. (2025). From Tools to Discourses: In Conversation with James Paul Gee on Literacy and Artificial Intelligence. *RELC Journal*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00336882251355879>
- Stranger-Johannessen, E., & Norton, B. (2019). Promoting early literacy and student investment in the African Storybook. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 18(6), 400-411. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2019.1674150>
- Teng F., & Yip, J. W. C. (2025). A narrative inquiry into language teacher identity construction in the global GenAI context. *International Journal of TESOL Studies*. 250901, 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.58304/ijts.250901>
- Truong, K. D., Huynh, H-H., Tran, Q. (2025). Vietnamese TESOL professionals' investment in research: A collaborative autoethnography of identity, capital, and sponsorsapes. *International Journal of TESOL Studies*, 251002, 1-29 <https://doi.org/10.58304/ijts.251002>
- Yazıcı, E. A., & Dikilitaş, K. (2025). Translanguaging as a Pedagogical Investment: A Poststructural Perspective on Identity Development. *International Journal of TESOL Studies*, 250803, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.58304/ijts.250803>
- Yang, S. Z. (2025). Identity, investment, and poetic autoethnography: Becoming an agentic TESOL professional through critical translanguaging. *International Journal of TESOL Studies*, 250713, 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.58304/ijts.250713>
- Zhang, Y. (2024). Investing in and divesting from learning-to-teach practices: A critical ethnography of a teacher of English in China. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(2). <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2024.2431021>
- Zhang, Y., & Darwin, R. (2025). Negotiating gender ideologies and investing in teacher identities: The motivation and investment of EFL pre-service teachers. *System*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2025.103669>
- Zhang, Y., & Gonzales, W. (2024). World Englishes pedagogy: Constructing learner identity. *ELT Journal*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccae053>
- Zhang, Y., & Huang, J. (2024). Learner Identity and Investment in EFL, EMI, and ESL Contexts: A Longitudinal Case Study of One Pre-Service Teacher. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2024.2318423>
- Zhang, Y., & Dikilitaş, K. (2025). Investing in critical digital literacies involving generative AI: A multiple-case study of second language novice teachers. *International Journal of TESOL Studies*, 250626, 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.58304/ijts.250626>