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"I Actually Speak More in English than in Vietnamese": Investment, Emotion, and Positioning Among Vietnamese Students in a Transnational EMI Program

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Abstract. This study examines how Vietnamese students in a transnational English-medium instruction (EMI) program make sense of their investment in English and negotiate their identities in classroom and institutional contexts. Adopting a qualitative interpretive approach, the study draws on three semi-structured interviews with each of five participants representing different stages of the transnational journey. Data were collected in Vietnamese, translated into English, and analyzed thematically through the lenses of Investment Theory and Positioning Theory. The findings show that English was understood not only as a medium of instruction but also as a form of linguistic capital linked to academic legitimacy, mobility, and future opportunity. At the same time, students' investment in English was shaped by emotional pressure, especially in relation to institutional expectations and the gatekeeping role of IELTS. The study also found that students actively negotiated their identities across languages, contexts, and program stages. This study contributes to EMI research by offering insights from a Vietnamese transnational context and by showing how aspiration, emotion, and discursive positioning intersect in students' lived experiences.

Keywords: transnational EMI; Vietnam; Investment; Emotion; Positioning

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1. Introduction

English has become increasingly central to the internationalization of higher education, shaping how universities define quality, mobility, and global competitiveness. This trend is especially visible in the rapid growth of English-medium instruction (EMI) in non-English-speaking contexts, where English is often positioned as a sign of institutional prestige and academic internationalization (Hillman et al., 2023). In the Asia-Pacific region, this transition is increasingly facilitated through transnational education (TNE). TNE is defined as the mobility of an education program or higher education institution across national borders to meet local demands for "international education at home" (Yao et al., 2021).

In Vietnam, this movement is driven by national mandates such as the Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA) and the National Foreign Language Project (Project 2020), which explicitly position English as vital human capital necessary for the country's economic integration into the global knowledge economy (Dang et al., 2024; Hoang, 2023). These policies have given rise to various EMI models, including Advanced Programs (APs) and joint international partnerships. These EMI programs aim to produce "world-class" graduates equipped for the global labor market (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025; Trang, 2025). Despite the high-stakes investment by the Vietnamese government and families in overseas and internationalized education, the implementation of EMI remains largely "ad hoc" (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025; Yao et al., 2021).

Current scholarship has shown that students in EMI and transnational education contexts often face significant academic and linguistic challenges, as they must simultaneously navigate complex disciplinary content and a foreign language medium (Yao et al., 2021). While recent studies have begun to examine learning investment (Trang, 2025) and achievement emotions (Galván Malagón & Morera-Bañas, 2025), much of the existing literature still relies on cross-sectional surveys and a neoliberal lens.

This often presents students as rational individuals seeking to increase their market value, while overlooking the "split self" and emotional tension they experience during these transitions (Dam, 2024; Şahan & Sahan, 2023). Furthermore, there is a lack of theoretical integration between the sociocultural reasons why students choose to study in English (*macro-level investment*) and the discursive ways students negotiate their everyday educational realities (*micro-level classroom positioning*). This methodological and theoretical paucity leaves the lived experiences of Vietnamese students in transnational settings significantly under-researched.

The present study addresses these gaps through a qualitative interpretive approach involving five students in a transnational EMI program in Vietnam. Drawing on Investment Theory and Positioning Theory, the study examines how students make sense of their investment in English in relation to identity, emotion, and aspiration, and how they negotiate discursive positioning in classroom and institutional contexts. Rather than using standardized questionnaires, this

approach allows the study to explore students' meanings, perspectives, and lived experiences in greater depth. It also makes it possible to understand how broader institutional and ideological pressures are experienced and interpreted in everyday educational life. By focusing on Vietnamese transnational students, this study contributes a context-sensitive perspective from a Southeast Asian setting that remains underrepresented in EMI research (Dang et al., 2024).

To guide this inquiry, the study addresses the following research questions:
1. How do Vietnamese students in transnational EMI programs make sense of their investment in English in relation to identity, emotion, and aspiration?
2. How do Vietnamese students in transnational EMI programs negotiate discursive positioning in classroom and institutional contexts?

2. Literature Review

The following section reviews the key concepts that frame this study. It begins with how English is conceptualized in EMI contexts, then discusses investment, emotion, and discursive positioning before presenting the conceptual framework that guides the analysis.

2.1 Conceptualizations of English: Neoliberal Promises vs. Structural Gatekeeping

In the contemporary academic landscape, English is frequently commodified and promoted through a neoliberal lens as a neutral, indispensable resource for academic excellence, global mobility, and employability (Şahan & Sahan, 2023). Moreover, international graduate students often internalize these ideologies and perceive EMI courses as important pathways to prestige and career advantage (Lee et al., 2021). However, critical research shows that English does not always create equal opportunities. Instead, it often becomes a "double barrier," forcing students to deal with both difficult subject content and limits in their English proficiency (Yao et al., 2021).

Consequently, strict monolingual policies may marginalize native linguistic repertoires, highlighting the necessity for translanguaging and the strategic integration of the first language (L1) to facilitate deeper comprehension (Pramerta et al., 2023). Furthermore, the assumption that English should seamlessly replace local languages overlooks the culturally embedded nature of pedagogy and classroom interaction (Hoang, 2023).

Although this body of research has critically challenged the neoliberal promise of English, much of it has been developed in Global North or dominant East Asian contexts. As a result, less is known about how English is ideologically constructed and experienced in Southeast Asian transnational EMI settings such as Vietnam, where global English mandates interact with local cultural values, institutional hierarchies, and language expectations. This geographical and contextual gap calls for further inquiry into how students interpret English not only as opportunity, but also as constraint within their own sociopolitical environment.

2.2 Investment, Agency, and Identity

To interpret why learners commit to the strenuous demands of EMI despite these barriers, researchers increasingly rely on the sociological framework of investment (Özdil & Kunt, 2025). Instead of viewing motivation purely as an individual psychological trait, investment theory posits that learners invest in language learning with the expectation of acquiring valuable social, cultural, and economic capital (Darvin & Norton, 2015). This investment is fundamentally linked to students' "imagined communities" and the evolving multilingual identities they hope to construct (Fang & Hu, 2022).

Furthermore, learners' commitments are frequently driven by "transnational affinity" and the desire to navigate effectively between distinct cultural environments (Dam, 2024). Nevertheless, maintaining this investment requires continuous behavioral engagement and self-efficacy. In Taiwan, Huang (2025) examined how self-efficacy, motivation, and behavioral engagement affect positive and negative self-identity among 390 EFL students in EMI programs. The study found that all behavioral engagement had the strongest effect on identity development. The study suggested that active participation, strong motivation, and confidence-building support students' positive self-perception in EMI contexts.

In China, Zhou and Thomas (2023) explored how 34 Chinese students managed their out-of-class listening practice during their first term in an EMI transnational university. The authors confirmed that students began with strong motivation to survive EMI lectures, but many later stopped practicing, while others continued by developing sustainable habits shaped by long-term goals, metacognitive awareness, and emotion regulation. However, existing research mostly examines investment at the macro level, focusing on learners' aspirations, capital, and imagined futures, but gives less attention to how investment is negotiated in everyday classroom interactions.

2.3 The Affective Landscape: Emotion as the Critical Mediator

Crucially, emotion serves as the mediator that connects the macro-level structures of investment to the micro-level lived realities of transnational students. The "affective turn" in applied linguistics views emotions not as personal inner feelings alone, but as socially shaped experiences closely connected to power, ideology, and institutional policies (Hillman et al., 2023). As Galván Malagón and Morera-Bañas (2025) asserted, learners often experience a wide range of emotions in EMI classrooms. At times, they feel proud and empowered, while at other times they may feel anxious, ashamed of their language ability, or alienated (Özdil & Kunt, 2025).

These emotional responses are crucial because feelings of inadequacy may lead to emotional fatigue and academic disengagement. In contrast, positive emotional adjustment can strengthen resilience and support sustained learner agency (Özdil & Kunt, 2025). Şahan and Sahan (2023) narrated the emotional impact of EMI on four engineering graduates in Turkey. They found that EMI was linked to feelings such as frustration, anxiety, pride, and a strong sense of obligation to improve

English for future employment. Besides, the ways in which individuals emotionally attach to specific academic places and contexts also significantly impact their intercultural adaptation and sense of belonging (Cena et al., 2021). Despite this growing attention to emotion, much of the literature still relies on cross-sectional designs that capture emotional states at only one point in time, overlooking how emotions develop, shift, and accumulate across students' journeys in transnational EMI programs. Therefore, further nuanced qualitative research is needed to explore how students in contexts such as Vietnam make sense of emotional struggles and resilience over time within the complexity of the transnational EMI.

2.4 Discursive Positioning and Narrative Sense-Making

If investment theory outlines the macro-level motivations of learners, Positioning Theory elucidates how students navigate their daily affective and ideological challenges at the micro-level (Hoang, 2023). Through narratives, individuals make sense of their experiences by positioning themselves and others within particular roles, rights, and responsibilities (Polkinghorne, 1995).

Yu (2026) emphasized the importance of "small stories", which means the seemingly mundane, everyday narratives of embarrassment or miscommunication, as performative spaces where transnational students conduct vital emotional labor and engage in agentive repositioning. Additionally, educators also utilize narrative positioning to manage the epistemological frictions inherent in transnational education. For example, Vu and Dinh (2024) unpacked how three Vietnamese teachers of English changed their teaching beliefs and practices after overseas international and intercultural experiences using positioning theory. The findings showed changes in their thinking, awareness, attitudes, and classroom behavior.

Another research conducted by Dang et al. (2024) examined how Vietnamese EMI teachers used their agency to respond to the demands of teaching content subjects in English. It found that they adapted their teaching in meaningful ways and, through this process, also reshaped themselves as EMI teachers. To date, research has highlighted how the teacher agency operates within EMI settings. However, there remains a gap in understanding how students in these programs (re)construct their identities within the macro and micro layers of the EMI programs. Accordingly, more theory-driven studies are needed in Southeast Asian settings such as Vietnam to show how identities are (re)constructed across both the macro and micro layers of transnational EMI programs.

2.5 The Theoretical framework

This study adopts an integrated poststructuralist framework to conceptualize identity as a dynamic "site of struggle" (Norton, 2013). At the macro-level, Investment Theory (Darvin & Norton, 2015) explains the sociocultural "why," viewing language learning as a social practice tied to power and "imagined communities". Complementing this, Positioning Theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) analyzes the micro-level "how" through the "positioning triangle" of positions, acts, and storylines.

By combining Investment Theory and Positioning Theory, this study aims to explain why students invest in EMI and how they make sense of and negotiate their identities in everyday experiences. This is useful for understanding students in the Vietnamese transnational EMI context, where global pressures and local expectations coexist.

3. Methodology

The following section presents the study's methodological design. It describes the research design, setting, and participants, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations used to explore students' investment, emotions, and identity negotiation in the transnational EMI context.

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach as the primary research design (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A qualitative interpretive approach is suitable for this study because it aims to understand how students make sense of their experiences across different stages of a transnational EMI journey. Rather than focusing on storytelling as the main form of analysis, this approach allows the researchers to explore participants' meanings, perspectives, and interpretations of identity, emotion, and investment in context.

3.2 Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at a university in Vietnam that offers a transnational EMI program in partnership with an Australian university. In the first phase of the program, students study in Vietnam for two years. During this stage, courses are taught by Vietnamese lecturers, and classroom instruction mainly uses both English and Vietnamese. After completing the first phase, students who meet the required academic standards and English language proficiency, equivalent to IELTS 6.5, are eligible to transfer to the second phase of the program in Australia to complete their degree. The program mainly attracts students who hope to study abroad and gain access to international education and future global career opportunities.

Five participants were purposely selected because they could provide rich and contrasting themes across key stages of the transnational EMI journey (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Rather than seeking a large sample, the study aimed for depth and variation (Nelson, 2017), which are consistent with qualitative interpretive research. These participants were chosen not only because they were enrolled in or had completed the program, but also because each one represented a distinct position within the transnational pathway. This allowed the researchers to explore how identity and investment are shaped differently at various points of the journey. Table 1 presents the participants' profiles.

Table 1: **Participant Profiles**

Participant	Gender	Program/Major	Stage in Transnational Journey
Na	Male	Finance	Currently in Phase 1 (Vietnam)
Hoa	Female	International Business	In the pre-departure transition phase
Van	Female	International Business	Withdrew from the EMI program and changed major
Cuc	Female	International Business	Currently in Phase 2 (abroad)
Ly	Female	Teaching Languages	Graduate of the program

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through three semi-structured interviews with each participant, lasting about 60 minutes each. **The use of three interviews allowed the researchers to revisit emerging ideas, clarify meanings, and develop sufficient conceptual depth across participants' experiences, rather than relying on a single interview encounter (Nelson, 2017). Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes because this duration was considered appropriate for eliciting rich qualitative accounts while minimizing participant fatigue.** We conducted online interviews via Google Meet. In addition, follow-up conversations were conducted when needed to clarify meanings and triangulate the interview data.

The interview prompts explored participants' views of English, their investment and aspirations, their emotional experiences in EMI, their identity negotiation across contexts, and their perceptions of IELTS as a gatekeeping requirement in the transnational journey. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to allow participants to fully express their experiences. After each interview, the first researcher transcribed and translated the data into English. The second researcher, who is not Vietnamese, then reviewed the English translations alongside the transcripts and discussed any unclear points with the first researcher to help ensure the intended meanings were preserved.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed interpretively to understand how participants made sense of their experiences across different stages of the transnational program. Thematic analysis was applied (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The researchers first read each interview several times to gain an overall understanding of the participant's account. Then, the data were coded to identify important ideas related to English, investment, aspiration, emotion, identity, and positioning. These codes were grouped into broader themes based on shared meanings across participants. Finally, the themes were interpreted through the lenses of Investment Theory and Positioning Theory.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Ethics

To enhance trustworthiness, the researchers interviewed each participant three times and had follow-up conversations when needed. Both researchers read the data many times and discussed the interpretations together. Care was also taken to make sure the translations were accurate. Besides, analytic memos and field notes were used to record ideas and reflections during the research process. The researchers also made their coding and theme development clear by linking them closely to participants' sharing. All participant names used in this manuscript are pseudonyms, and any potentially identifying details were removed or modified to protect participants' confidentiality while preserving the narrative coherence of their experiences. The researchers also reflected on how their own backgrounds might influence the study.

4. Results and Findings

This section presents the major findings organized around students' understandings of English, their investment and aspirations, emotional experiences, discursive positioning, and perceptions of IELTS in the transnational EMI journey.

4.1 Vietnamese Students' Investment in English: Identity, Emotion, and Aspiration

4.1.1 English as Linguistic Capital and Cognitive Transformation

Across the interviews, English is conceptualized not merely as a medium of instruction, but as a powerful mechanism for cognitive transformation, academic legitimacy, and intercultural connection. For these students, English functions as an indispensable linguistic capital that fundamentally alters how they process information and interact with the world.

Hoa explicitly articulated how acquiring academic English shifted her cognitive framework, allowing her to approach discipline-specific concepts with greater clarity. Furthermore, English proficiency directly translates to economic and academic capital. Van noted how achieving her required IELTS score of 6.0+ functioned as direct economic capital, sparing her from remedial coursework:

> "*Yes, [my scores] are all above 6. So one time is enough, meeting the requirement immediately... Because it is still valid, thanks to that, I also saved a large amount of fees instead of having to retake the intensive English program.*"(Van)

Similarly, Ly recognized her high English proficiency as a distinct competitive advantage in the Australian job market. When applying to tutor a native Australian child, her IELTS score acted as a critical credential validating her legitimacy:

> "*They use a platform where I can upload my profile... When the boy's mother contacted me, she had already browsed all my certificates. At that time my IELTS was 7.0. My speaking was 7.0, and my reading was 7.5. I think it was an advantage, yes.*" (Ly)

For Ly, English was also strictly enforced as the legitimate academic language within the institutional space, creating a distinct boundary between formal and informal domains. She shared:

> *"Inside the classroom we definitely had to use English 100%. Even during the short 5-minute break... if students ran up to ask questions, the lecturers would still answer in English... Outside class, we would switch to Vietnamese."* (Ly)

4.1.2 Investment and Future-Oriented Aspirations

Darvin and Norton's (2015) concept of "investment" is highly visible in the students' interviews, as their commitment to English is inextricably linked to their "imagined communities" and future-oriented global aspirations.

Ly's narrative provides a poignant example of transnational affinity and imagined future selves. Observing the graduate students on her Australian campus, she projected her own identity into that elite academic space, physically anchoring her Vietnamese identity to her global aspirations:

> "*Before the day I flew back to Vietnam... I wore the áo dài [traditional Vietnamese dress]... there were many masters and PhD students around that area, so I imagined that one day I would also sit there, in that exact spot, also wearing an áo dài... I often joked about it too... Ten years from now... I'll be the one sitting here*." (Ly)

This strong future-oriented investment was also echoed in Na's narrative. He framed his enrollment in the EMI program and his desire for transnational mobility not merely as a wish to emigrate, but as a strategic "stepping stone" to access elite global academic communities. He explained:

> "*For me personally, it's not that I am a "xenophile" [a person who is attracted to foreign peoples, manners, or cultures] or want to immigrate, but I urge myself to access an international learning environment. At that time, I thought that studying abroad would be a good stepping stone for me, so that later I could study for my Master's degree abroad as well."* (Na)

Similarly, Hoa viewed her investment in overseas education as a dual accumulation of both economic and cultural capital, combining professional pragmatism with a deep yearning for intercultural engagement:

> "*My expectation was simple. I wanted a clear degree to easily develop my future career. Besides, I also wanted to go to experience, because each country has a different culture... When going abroad, I want to go to experience, to live my youth to the fullest.*" (Hoa)

However, Van demonstrated how her investment in English study abroad programs was driven by a desire to assimilate into broader global cultures, fundamentally shifting her worldview:

> *"When I wanted to enroll, I didn't enroll just for a foreign university degree. I enrolled because I am young and I want to broaden my horizons, to approach as many perspectives as possible... If it's in the West, it's more individual [individualistic]*." (Van)

4.1.3 Emotional Investment: From Pressure to Empowerment

The transition between Vietnamese and English environments evoked a volatile emotional landscape. The students frequently oscillated between intense vulnerability—such as linguistic anxiety, imposter syndrome, and test pressure—and profound feelings of liberation, pride, and empowerment.

High-stakes English exams like IELTS serve as a significant source of emotional tension. Na described the impending deadline for his IELTS certificate as a major stressor directly tied to his transnational mobility:

> *"I see the English part as a "sensitive chokepoint"[chốt nhạy] for me... If I enroll in the July semester next year, then by March-April, I must have the IELTS certificate. The pressure is big, but not to the level of extreme stress. However, I have started to pay close attention to it."* (Na)

Ly experienced acute emotional tension and "imposter syndrome" when her identity as a non-native speaker clashed with her role as a tutor for a native Australian child. This inversion of linguistic power dynamics initially caused severe self-doubt:

> "*There was a period of about two to three weeks where I felt he didn't seem to be learning much... I started to feel like: "This is getting a bit difficult... maybe I'm not doing it right…" I think I did experience that kind of imposter syndrome, overthinking a lot, feeling confused about how to approach him*." (Ly)

However, as she navigated this challenge, her confidence grew, transforming her emotional state from anxiety to professional validation.

4.2 Vietnamese Students' Negotiation of Discursive Positioning

4.2.1 Small Stories and Agentive Repositioning

Through the telling of "small stories," the participants actively engaged in discursive positioning, revealing how they negotiate their fluid, hybrid identities. They demonstrated keen metalinguistic awareness of how different languages "positioned" them in terms of personality traits and interactional norms.

Ly shared a highly reflective narrative about how she realized she performed an entirely different identity depending on the language she was speaking. She noted that the pragmatic demands of English small talk actively repositioned her discursive habits:

> "*I called my younger sister... We talked in English normally. But suddenly she said, "Why do you talk so much in English? When you speak Vietnamese, you don't talk this much." That made me start observing myself. I realized that maybe when speaking English, the English-speaking culture – especially the small-talk culture – pushes you to generate more ideas, more things to say. So in daily conversations, I actually speak more when I'm using English than when using Vietnamese."* (Ly)

Cuc positioned herself globally by contrasting standardized tests. She positioned IELTS as a rigorous academic benchmark, dismissing alternatives such as Duolingo. She said:

> "*Vietnam hasn't accepted it yet, but some schools in Australia accept [Duolingo] for easy entry majors like Business. I see Duolingo doesn't have high academic validity like IELTS, so I still prefer taking IELTS more.*" (Cuc)

By doing so, Cuc positioned herself as a serious academic investing in legitimate global credentials.

4.2.2 IELTS as Institutional Positioning and Academic Legitimacy

A prominent theme emerging from the data is how participants perceive the IELTS exam. Rather than viewing it merely as an objective language assessment, students critically evaluate it as an institutional commitment, an academic preparation tool, and an imperfect measure of real-world survival.

Participants unanimously agreed that achieving a high IELTS score (typically 6.0 to 6.5) was a necessary and logical institutional threshold. Na positioned the IELTS certificate not as a perfect reflection of his abilities, but as a formal "commitment" between the student and the host university:

> "*We don't have anything to prove that we can communicate effectively in English. Actually, in my opinion, the IELTS certificate only evaluates four skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing. It cannot show all other skills when you study at university. However, to prove that you have the ability to use English, IELTS is a proof of commitment. It shows that: I have this English proficiency, and if the school requires this level, I have achieved it*." (Na)

Cuc echoed this sentiment, validating the 6.5 threshold as an academic safety net

> *"I think it must be 6.5 or above to be fine. 6.0 is not very reassuring. Back then, my listening and speaking scores were all above 6.5, so I was used to communicating and writing in English. I didn't face much difficulty when using English to study or talk"*. (Cuc)

The interviews reveal a nuanced view of the pedagogical value of IELTS preparation. Hoa positioned IELTS training as a vital bridge to global awareness, noting that the broad, academic topics directly fostered her "global citizen" mindset:

> "*Actually IELTS is an academic exam, and the topics in IELTS are quite broad, from politics, war to geography... In general, IELTS supports me a lot academically. Almost all important topics are covered. I remember topics like economics, global economics, education – which is also global education*." (Hoa)

Ly offered a highly critical, strategic interpretation of IELTS. She perceptively separated the content of IELTS from its strategies. While acknowledging that the specific topics of the exam might not appear in daily Australian life, she argued

that the test's structural strategies are indispensable for surviving transnational higher education:

> "*I feel IELTS Speaking evaluates skills more than content. For example, Part 3 might ask you to talk about 'the history of something,' but when you study abroad, you don't talk about those topics. But the strategies you use — how you sustain an idea for two minutes — that is very important when studying abroad... Even though English teachers rarely analyze charts or diagrams in real life, the academic writing structure is still useful. You learn that in a body paragraph you need a topic sentence, and you need supporting evidence.*" (Ly)

5. Discussion

The findings reveal that the journey of five Vietnamese students in transnational EMI programs is a complex negotiation of self, mediated by shifting emotional landscapes and power dynamics. By integrating macro-level investment with micro-level discursive positioning, this study moves beyond the "technical view" of EMI to explore its ontological nature as a site of social struggle.

5.1 Investment, Emotion, and Aspiration: Making Sense of the English Journey

The first research question sought to understand how Vietnamese students make sense of their investment in English. The findings suggest that, for these participants, English is not merely a linguistic tool but an indispensable form of linguistic capital that facilitates a "cognitive transformation." This aligns with the neoliberal lens described by Şahan and Sahan (2023), where English is commodified as a resource for global mobility. As Ball (2012) argues, the "neoliberal imaginary" in global education reshapes the student's sense of self as an enterprise to be constantly improved.

However, while Yao et al., (2021) frame English as a "double barrier" that creates marginalization, the students in this study demonstrate a more proactive embrace of this commodification. They view English as a pragmatic "economic capital" (Van's avoidance of fees) and a "credential" for professional legitimacy (Ly's tutoring). This confirms Darvin and Norton's (2015) theory that investment is a social practice tied to the acquisition of symbolic capital, but adds a layer of Southeast Asian pragmatism: the investment is not just for "prestige" (Lee et al., 2021) but for tangible financial and professional survival.

Crucially, this investment is mediated by a volatile affective landscape. The transition into transnational EMI environments creates what Na termed "sensitive chokepoints," high-pressure emotional moments where institutional requirements like IELTS act as structural gatekeepers. These findings support the "affective turn" (Hillman et al., 2023), showing that "imposter syndrome" is socially shaped by the power dynamics of being a non-native speaker. While Özdil and Kunt (2025) warn that such anxiety can lead to academic disengagement, these students demonstrate significant resilience. By projecting their identities into "imagined communities," symbolized by Ly's áo dài narrative, they resolve emotional friction and transform vulnerability into professional empowerment. These moments require intense "emotion labor" (Benesch, 2017), as students must manage the psychological friction between their

local identities and the demands of an elite academic space. Thus, universities should move beyond viewing English proficiency as a purely cognitive skill. We argue that there is a need for affective-support frameworks that acknowledge the emotional labor students perform during "chokepoint" periods (like IELTS deadlines) to prevent burnout and long-term alienation.

5.2 Negotiating Discursive Positioning in Classroom and Institutional Contexts
Regarding the second research question, the findings reveal how students engage in agentive repositioning through "small stories" and metalinguistic awareness. Ly's observation that she becomes "more talkative" in English illustrates how students do not just learn a language; they negotiate a hybrid identity. This supports Yu's (2026) emphasis on everyday narratives as performative spaces and contrasts with Hoang's (2023) concern that monolingual policies simply marginalize students.

Instead, these students use English to "perform" a global version of themselves. They demonstrate a keen awareness of the "positioning triangle" (Davies & Harré, 1990), in which speaking English repositions them from a local student to a global interlocutor. To support this development, EMI pedagogy should embrace "translanguaging," which allows students to use their full linguistic repertoire, both Vietnamese and English, to make sense of complex academic concepts (García & Wei, 2015). Furthermore, the students' negotiation extends to the institutional level of the IELTS examination. Rather than viewing the test as a neutral assessment, students like Na and Cuc position it as a "proof of commitment" and an "academic safety net." This discursive move allows them to claim legitimacy within the university's hierarchy.

Unlike the engineering graduates in Şahan and Sahan's (2023) study who felt a heavy sense of "obligation," these students strategically value the test's "structural strategies" for academic survival, even while critiquing its content. This suggests that Vietnamese students are highly agentive in how they make sense of their experiences (Polkinghorne, 1995), choosing to see institutional hurdles as vital bridges to global awareness rather than just restrictive barriers. Hence, EMI pedagogy should shift from "teaching the test" to "translingual strategy building." Since students already value the structural logic of English (e.g., academic writing patterns) over rote content, we call for instructors to explicitly link these academic structures to the students' native linguistic repertoires to facilitate deeper "cognitive transformation" without erasing their local identities.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how five Vietnamese students in a transnational EMI program made sense of their investment in English and negotiated their identities within classroom and institutional contexts. **It addressed the need to understand English not only as a medium of instruction, but also as a force shaping students' aspirations, emotions, and positioning in transnational higher education.** The findings suggest that English was understood as more than a medium of instruction; it was closely linked to mobility, academic legitimacy, and

future opportunity, while also carrying emotional pressure shaped by institutional expectations. Rather than passively accepting these demands, the students actively interpreted and negotiated their positions across different stages of the transnational journey. **These findings show that students' EMI experiences involve both opportunity and pressure, as English can support global aspirations while also creating emotional and institutional challenges.**

The study makes two main contributions. First, it extends EMI research by offering evidence from a Vietnamese transnational context, which remains underrepresented in the literature. Second, it shows the value of combining Investment Theory and Positioning Theory to explain how students' aspirations, emotions, and identity work are connected in everyday experience. These findings also suggest that EMI programs should pay greater attention to students' emotional well-being and to the limits of using language tests alone as indicators of readiness.

Therefore, a key takeaway is that transnational EMI programs should support students not only linguistically, but also emotionally and institutionally. However, the study has several limitations. Its small sample size and single institutional setting limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the study relied mainly on interview data, which may not fully capture classroom practices or longer-term identity development. Future research could therefore include a larger range of participants, multiple sites, and additional research instruments to further examine students' experiences in transnational EMI programs.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Appendix 1

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

The following semi-structured interview questions were used to guide the interviews with the participants. Follow-up questions were asked when necessary to clarify meanings and explore participants' experiences in greater depth.

1. Can you tell me about your educational journey before joining the transnational EMI program?
2. Why did you decide to join this program?
3. How did you understand the role of English before entering the program?
4. How has your understanding of English changed during your study in the program?
5. In what ways do you think English is connected to your academic goals, future career, or personal aspirations?
6. Can you describe your emotional experiences while studying through English in this program?
7. Have you ever felt pressure, confidence, anxiety, pride, or uncertainty when using English in academic settings? Can you give an example?
8. How do you see yourself as a student in this transnational EMI program?
9. How do you position yourself when using English in classroom or institutional contexts?
10. What role does IELTS play in your transnational EMI journey, and do you think it reflects students' readiness for studying abroad or studying in English?