



Investment in English language learning by adult Iranians

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Abstract

This paper investigates how Iranian learners invest in English language education amid various cultural and societal influences. Recently, Iranian authorities have expressed concern about the impact of English on society and culture. The first author interviewed eight adult learners in Iran to explore their perceptions of learners' investment in English language learning, drawing on Darwin and Norton's (2016) model. The findings reveal a complex interplay between local and global factors affecting language learning and identity formation. Despite government policies aimed at preserving traditional values, learners express personal and societal benefits from acquiring English. The research highlights that learners' motivations stem more from this interplay of benefits, rather than just globalisation, which Iranian authorities often view as a threat. This underscores the resilience of Iranian learners as they navigate their linguistic and cultural identities, demonstrating that they see English not only as a foreign language but as a tool for personal and societal advancement. This study contributes to the understanding of how Iranian learners navigate and invest in English language education, shedding light on the cultural and societal factors that shape their perceptions and motivations.

Keywords: *Education language policy; English language learning; globalisation of English; imagined community; investment.*

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Introduction

The growing popularity of English language learning among Iranians has raised concerns among Iranian authorities. The precise number of language schools in Iran is unclear due to the existence of unregistered institutions throughout the country (Moharami & Daneshfar, 2021). In 2016, the Iranian supreme leader's criticism of the foreign language education approach further intensified the political condemnation of learning English in the country. As a result, Iranian officials have been implementing changes in language policy to manage the increasing interest in English language learning. This paper aims to examine adult Iranians' investment in English language learning and its implications for cultural practices within Iran's contested sociopolitical landscape.

Islam and its ideologies have formed the bedrock of Iranian education for more than 40 years. Today, Islamic values are woven into Iranian culture, with Islamic ideologies present in every aspect of everyday life. However, over the past decade, authorities have been challenged by the presence of the English language and its impact on learners' culture and social identity (Daneshfar & Moharami, 2024).

In 2011, in an attempt to strengthen Islamic values and counter the influence of Western ideologies associated with the globalisation of the English language, Iranian authorities implemented a significant overhaul of the educational system (Malekzadeh, 2011). The new curriculum, titled the "Fundamental Transformation of Education", aimed to promote a pro-Islamic ideology and replace the previous curriculum influenced by the Pahlavi regime. Currently, according to educational policy, secondary school students have the option to learn English or other approved foreign languages, in addition to compulsory Arabic instruction. However, due to the lack of educational materials and teachers of other foreign languages, alongside the widespread presence of private English language schools, the English language remains one of the most studied languages in the country (Sadeghi & Richards, 2016).

Recent reforms in Iran's education system have sought to align higher education with Islamic values while countering Western influence. This 'purification' aims to establish a knowledge framework that prioritises local over global paradigms, reflecting the state's ideological stance (Bazoobandi, 2024). Morady Moghaddam and Murray (2019) note the government's attempts to balance globalisation with Islamic values, revealing tensions in language instruction, particularly regarding the status of English. Iranmehr et al. (2024) analysed English language education strategies in Iran and Saudi Arabia, noting significant differences: Iran's anti-imperialist policies lead to limited access and localised teaching, whereas Saudi Arabia's neoliberal framework promotes early English learning and communicative methods, enhancing classroom integration. These contrasting approaches reflect the substantial influence of political, cultural, and economic factors on language education in both nations. Ultimately, these reforms illustrate the complexities of navigating modernisation while adhering to traditional values in the Iranian educational landscape.

This study explores how adult Iranians invest in learning English and examines the broader implications of English language learning on Iranian cultural practices within the context of globalisation.

Policy changes and Iranians' investment in learning English

Language policy extends beyond the realm of language itself (Bouchard & Glasgow, 2019), as it explores the relationship between language variables and non-language variables (Spolsky, 2004). This allows politicians and ideologists to manipulate the language situation to reform society and shape identity (Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010). Iranian authorities view the learning of English and its globalisation as a perceived threat to Iranian culture, with allegations of a 'vicious plot' by the West to suppress Iranian identity (Moharami, 2021).

The contested nature of English language learning in post-revolutionary Iran has resulted in significant changes to the country's language policy, with politicians utilising language policy as a means to reinforce their intended values and maintain control over people's perceptions, practices, and values. Iranian policymakers primarily aim to preserve national solidarity and promote an Iranian-Islamic identity (Gholaminejad & Raeisi-Vanani, 2021).

Despite political ideologies and policies, Iranian language learners recognise the value of English as a form of capital and remain committed to learning the language (Moharami et al., 2022). Research by Pierce (1995) has shown that learners' backgrounds and societal influences play a crucial role in investment in language learning and practice, highlighting the complex relationship between learners and their social environment. Exploring learners' investment and commitment to language learning enables an understanding of power relationships in various contexts (Darvin & Norton, 2016). Language learning is not merely a means of communication but a pathway through which learners come to understand themselves, their communities, and their histories (Norton, 2020; Norton & Toohey, 2004).

The concept of investment explains Iranian language learners' imaginary engagement with a new group of people who have no tangible contact with each other and form an imagined community with English language speakers. Norton (2013) claims that language learning offers a wider range of symbolic and material resources for learners. The change in learners' access to resources shifts their cultural capital, altering their imagined future. Norton (2013) writes that "the value of language learners' cultural capital increases, so learners' sense of themselves, their hopes for the future, and their imagined identities are reassessed" (p. 6). Learners, through learning English, create an imaginary world and future (Norton, 2015). Language learners' commitment to the language is based on their inclination toward a particular (imaginary or real) group, society or community (Norton, 2020). Imagination allows language learners to create multiple images of the world that they wish to be part of. Learners in their imaginations form relationships with others and define themselves in another world that they have not experienced.

Norton and Toohey (2001) state that language learners “exercise human agency to work on their entry into the social networks, so they can practice and improve their competence in the target language” (p. 256). In this study, agency refers to learners’ capacity to act purposefully and make strategic choices in navigating social structures (Norton, 2013). Therefore, language learning is an ongoing process of decision-making based on what learners have experienced and understood from their environment. The commitment and investment in language learning by Iranian learners offer access to symbolic and material resources, reshaping their cultural capital and influencing their imagined future (Norton, 2013). Through the process of learning English, learners create an imaginary world and future, establishing connections with others and defining themselves within a world they have yet to experience (Norton, 2015). This explains Iranian language learners’ imaginative engagement with an imagined community of English language speakers, where they exercise agency to enter social networks and enhance their language proficiency.

Agency plays a crucial role in influencing adult Iranian language learners’ decision to learn English, as it allows them to engage with their imagined communities and shape their imagined identities (Tajeddin et al., 2021). Learners’ experiences and investments in learning English contribute to the construction of their imagined identities, highlighting the socially and historically constructed relationship between language learners and the languages they learn, ultimately impacting their objectives for language learning and cultural practices.

The concept of investment, as developed by Pierce (1995), Norton (2013) and extended by Darwin and Norton (2015), provides a lens to examine the dynamic relationship between language learners’ identities, access to capital, and the ideological structures they navigate. Investment differs from motivation in that it foregrounds the socially and historically constructed relationship between learners and the target language, acknowledging power relations that shape learning opportunities. Darwin and Norton’s (2016) model integrates three components—identity, capital, and ideology—offering a comprehensive framework for situating learner experiences within broader sociopolitical contexts.

Research on investment in restrictive sociopolitical environments highlights the tension between learners’ aspirations and state control (e.g., Gao et al., 2014; Kubota & McKay, 2011). In the Iranian context, studies by Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2017) and Rashidi and Hosseini (2019) reveal how language policies attempt to limit English while learners pursue it as a means of cultural and economic mobility. Yet, empirical work focusing specifically on adult learners’ investment in English remains scarce.

This study adopts Darwin and Norton’s (2016) investment model, which conceptualises investment as a nexus of identity, capital, and ideology. Identity refers to the constantly changing sense of self shaped through social interaction. Capital encompasses economic, cultural, and social resources that can be gained or exchanged through language learning. Ideology concerns the belief systems and power relations that regulate access to these resources. By mapping learners’ experiences against these three dimensions, this study addresses a gap in existing research on the investment of adult Iranian learners in English.

Agency as a concept complements this framework by describing learners' active decision-making and strategic use of English to enhance their imagined identities. In practice, learners invest in English not only to acquire linguistic skills but also to gain economic, cultural, and social capital while negotiating ideological constraints. Investment explains the 'why' of learners' motivations and imagined futures, while agency explains the 'how', the purposeful actions and choices learners take to realise these outcomes. Integrating both concepts provides a nuanced understanding of adult Iranian learners' commitment to English.

Methodology

This paper utilises data from a larger mixed-method study, which involved 105 voluntary adult language learners who were studying or teaching in various language schools in Tehran, the capital city of Iran. The participants completed an online qualitative survey at the initial stage of the study. Subsequently, based on the primary data analysis and the design of interview questions (see Appendix A), the first author conducted semi-structured interviews of 30–45 minutes with 14 purposefully selected volunteers, consisting of seven males and seven females. The selection of interview participants was based on factors such as their experience with language learning, age, occupation, education, and major of study. For this paper, the focus is on the qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews, and the findings are reported as a case study.

A case study is an empirical qualitative research design that allows for the examination of one or multiple cases within their natural context (Yin, 2015). By conducting a case study, the complexities of the phenomenon can be explored in-depth, and the inclusion of multiple cases offers the opportunity to examine the research subject from various perspectives (Thomas, 2021). Reporting the findings as a case study helps to narrow down the study's focus and delve into the views of participants who share similar perspectives. In this study, the insights provided by eight participants (five males and three females) were purposefully selected to reflect diverse experiences and perspectives; as a case study, the aim was depth rather than statistical representativeness. Their individual experiences and perspectives on language learning in Iran provided valuable and comprehensive knowledge regarding its impact on cultural practices.

Author 1 conducted the data collection and interviewed the volunteers separately in a mutually agreed location. Popular Iranian names are used to protect the privacy of participants (see Table 1). Interviews were recorded, and author 1 referred to his reflective journal to enhance the data analysis.

Table 1*Interview participants' profile*

No.	Name	Sex	Profile
1	Amir	Male	Amir is an 18-year-old high school graduate who intends to take the Iranian national university entrance exam soon which includes English knowledge. He wants to be an English teacher in the future.
2	Amirhossein	Male	Amirhossein is very confident in his English knowledge and proud of his polished British accent that he acquired from movies and British podcasts. He is 18 years old and a final-year high school student.
3	Bahram	Male	Bahram holds a BA degree in business administration and teaches English. He is 26 years old and enjoys reading Persian books, studying a range of subjects that are outside his field of expertise.
4	Mahdi	Male	Mahdi is 20 years old and besides studying English for six years in a private language school, he studies accounting at a university. He is practising for the IELTS test to find better international opportunities in future.
5	Mohammad-Reza	Male	Mohammad-Reza is studying political science at a local university. He is 21 years old and encourages people around him to learn English.
6	Hanieh	Female	Hanieh is 24 years old and married. She is currently studying her BA in English translation and teaches English to adult advanced level students.
7	Shirin	Female	Shirin studies her BA in executive management in a newly established university, near to her home. She is 24 years old and single.
8	Behnaz	Female	Behnaz is a high school graduate and passionate about learning English. She is 20 years old and married. She views education and English as a pathway to a better life.

The authors of this paper embraced the concept of reflexivity, which holds significant importance in qualitative research (Cooper & Rogers, 2014). Reflexivity focuses on researchers' personal experiences and their relationships with participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Author 1 shares the participants' cultural background and prior professional context. This fostered trust with the participants but also required constant reflexive attention to power dynamics. During the data collection process, author 1 developed a significant relationship as a critical friend of the participants and was mindful of power dynamics and power imbalances. Understanding and addressing this power relationship is crucial for maintaining the integrity of a study (Leavy, 2017). Author 1 was aware of both shared understandings and the potential for bias. For example, in interviews with former students, prior teacher–learner dynamics occasionally shifted the tone of responses, either fostering openness or creating hesitancy. To address this, Author 1 explicitly framed interviews in a manner that encouraged participants to challenge his interpretations and conducted follow-up questions to clarify meaning.

Author 1 transcribed the recorded interviews and conducted a thematic analysis following Ritchie and Spencer's (1994) five-step analysis process. This process involved familiarisation with the data, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping, and interpretation. After the initial analysis, authors 2 and 3 contributed to the interpretation of key findings and their connection to relevant literature.

The involvement of multiple researchers with distinct roles allowed for the utilisation of three out of four of Brookfield's (1995) critical reflexive lenses. This facilitated the management of researchers' subjectivity and ensured the preservation of the study's structural integrity. Following Brookfield's model of reflection, author 1 maintained a reflective journal to document personal self-reflection and engaged with the other authors for peer reflection and further understanding. Authors 2 and 3, experienced researchers, assumed outsider roles, observing the data collection process and participating in the in-depth thematic analysis stage.

Analysis and findings

This study explores adult Iranian language learners' investment in English language learning against the current Iranian political climate. The authors identified the dynamics of global and local factors influencing learners' commitment toward English language learning. Participants, in their words, established their investment in English language learning considering local factors and interactions with global sources. These local factors included the significance of English as added value in the real-time needs of Iranian language learners, the integration of English with current technological and global developments, and its role in communication with the international world. These factors go hand in hand with the global benefits of learning English, and it is argued affect adult Iranians' cultural practices in various ways.

Factors shaping adult Iranian language learners

Adult Iranian language learners' investment is shaped by interlinked factors, including parental influence, socio-economic conditions, technological access, globalisation, and the perceived status of English as a global language. As stated earlier, investment in English language learning among Iranian language learners is influenced by a combination of local and global factors. The data revealed that these factors include cultural and societal influences, socio-economic environment, globalisation and international communication, and access to resources. These influencing factors are interconnected and dynamic.

The interviews highlighted the impact of family and parental influence on learners' investment in English and its societal importance. Bourdieu (1977) contends that environmental influences such as parents and family dispositions toward English language learning inform learners' perceptions and appreciation of a language. Participants' parents played a significant role in shaping participants' outlook towards English, emphasising its relevance for future career prospects. For instance, Mohammad-Reza's mother, despite not having studied English herself, recognised the value of learning English and encouraged him to learn it. Mohammad-Reza speculated on her mother's reasons, saying, "*I think it is because of her experience, she knows that if I learn English, it is useful in future, and now I think she is right*". For a range of reasons parents viewed the learning of English in a positive way and as benefiting the future lives of their children. Mahdi and Amir described their parents' views on learning English as their

parents wanting them to be prepared for the future and learn English to enhance their career pathway. Mahdi believes his father knew the importance of English and supported his learning of the language. Amir commented that his *“parents are not educated, but they care about English, and they say it’s good for your future. My brother says you can find a better job, and you can be a teacher and get higher salaries”*.

The accumulation of capital, as defined by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) as resources obtained through networks of relationships, also plays a role in Iranian language learners’ motivations to learn English. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), “social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (p. 119). Participants, such as Amir, Mohammad-Reza, and Mahdi, identified various purposes for learning English, such as travelling, career advancement, immigration, and adapting to economic conditions in the country. Learning English is perceived to acquire desirable social capital in Iranian society, offering broader lifestyle opportunities and employment prospects compared to other languages. Bourdieu’s (1977) definition of capital can be drawn on to explain reasons for learning English, which involve providing Iranians with a broader lifestyle and employment opportunities that are not available through the learning of other languages. According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital is accessible to individuals who actively strive to acquire, and they work to achieve that power or status.

Socio-economic factors also influenced Iranian adults’ commitment to learning English. The participants (Amir, Mahdi, and Amirhossein) acknowledged the impact of Iran’s political and economic circumstances on their considerations of immigration, which in turn led them to invest time and money in English language learning. *“The current financial situation, the exchange rate of the U.S. dollar, and the perceived low quality of life in Iran”* were highlighted by Amir as socio-economic factors contributing to his motivation to learn English. Norton’s investment theory emphasises the role of the learner as an agent in language learning (Pierce, 1995). Amir’s comment highlights the influence of socio-economic considerations on language learners’ decision-making process (Norton & Toohey, 2011).

As an international language, English provides the participants with external perspectives on the world, expanding their cosmopolitan outlook. Additionally, it supports their understanding of their own society. Hanieh perceives learning English as a way to enter a broader world, stating, *“you know it’s like you are living in a small place, then your world will be bigger, you will see everything more clearly”*. Amirhossein and Hanieh shared their appreciation for learning English as a means to learn about Iran and access information that is not available in Persian. Amirhossein mentioned, *“I have connected [dots about religion] with each other, and some English sources have helped me to be atheist ... as we do not have Persian sources for this [atheism], it is a religious fact and having no freedom”*. He openly declared his atheism and believed that English knowledge enables Iranians to gain a better understanding of the situation they are living in.

English has become closely associated with technology and computer science in Iranian society due to the influence of mass media, the internet, and social networks (Zarrinabadi & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2018). Proficiency in English and computer science is considered essential for career development, as expressed by participants like Shirin and Mahdi. Mahdi remarked how *“nowadays, when you are an accountant, you should work with computers, computers are in English and can solve issues”*. These participants view English and digital literacy as interconnected and crucial for self-improvement and professional growth.

The participants unanimously recognised the importance of English for communication with individuals from outside Iran. Learning English was perceived as a survival skill for international relationships (Dolati & Mikaili, 2011) and a gateway to a better life and access to the modern world (Nishanthi, 2018). Bahram clearly stated, *“as you know, English is the international language and the only language that simply solves most of your problems when it comes to communication, reading and learning more so”*. English proficiency was seen as crucial for addressing local needs and for using computers and the Internet.

Learning English was also seen as a means to engage in social and political discussions and to challenge inequalities, both within Iran and on the international stage, according to Mohammad-Reza, Amir, and Mahdi. Participants like Amirhossein employ English to share political messages and express their opinions on social inequalities and unfair sanctions. Amirhossein talked about his communication experience with American and English-speaking people through social media. *“We speak a lot about politics ... for example, I have a friend in America, Washington DC ... and he says a lot about Trump, he says a lot about America and their problems ... I say about our economic problems”*. Sanctions not only involve governments but also affect people's daily lives.

English and how it is used need to be separated. Smith (2013) notes the requirement, “to distinguish between a language itself and the way that its speakers use it” (p. 10). The participants acknowledged English as an international language with a dominant role in global commerce and communication. Bahram stated,

“No matter what we think about this language, this language is the international one. So, we are going to need this, and it has a dominant language in world commerce and let us say a computer or the internet.” (Bahram)

The participants emphasised the necessity of learning English for international communication, travel, business, and academic purposes. According to Behnaz, English was perceived as the most widely used international language, surpassing other Western languages in terms of its value and practicality. Mohammad-Reza shared a similar view with Behnaz, arguing:

“[English] is the international language; you have to know it, and it is not optional. I think when you want to travel to other countries, you should be able to communicate, and English is a good way to do that. Travelling, business, lots of things, it is the international language. Nowadays, if you want to write an

article, you should write it in English so the world could see it.” (Mohammad-Reza)

This recognition of English as a global language aligns with the current dominance of English in business contexts and higher education (Sung, 2019). While participants recognised English as a global language, they differentiated it from the broader forces of globalisation. For them, English was primarily a linguistic resource, whereas globalisation encompassed political, economic, and cultural dimensions that sometimes provokes resistance. Baker and Fang (2021) highlight the strong link between English and students’ sense of intercultural citizenship. These understandings shape participants’ perceptions and beliefs about English language learning, reflecting the significance of the English language around the world.

In addition, the process of globalised English language learning sparks curiosity among learners. Hanieh shared her curiosity about foreign religions and how English played a crucial role in satisfying her curiosity. She explained that when there were no Persian-language resources available, she had to rely on English to access unique versions of the information she wanted to learn. She further stressed that English was indispensable when there were no Iranian versions of the subjects she wanted to explore. English, therefore, serves not only as an international language for learning about other countries but also as a means for participants to gain a deeper understanding of Iran and their own circumstances by expanding their perspectives.

Furthermore, English’s popularity for international communication and business purposes, coupled with its historical roots in Iran, reinforces the perception among Iranians that English is a powerful language. For instance, Mahdi, who foregrounded the connection between English and his career, commented on how learning English has benefited him:

“Learning English has had numerous advantages in my life. The first one is my job ... the second one is the power of communicating with other people and understanding others. [To understand] what’s going on around me, understanding movies, music ... the power of communication is the most important part when you want to travel overseas or abroad, you have to communicate with other people.” (Mahdi)

Guerrero (2010) describes language learning as providing individuals with automatic and limitless access to economic benefits, creating a sense of belonging to an imagined community, and granting equality and knowledge. The findings indicate that the participants consider English as more than just a linguistic exercise; they view it as an integral part of preparing for the future. These findings highlight the diverse motivations of Iranian language learners for studying English and underscore its impact on Iranian culture and society.

In summary, investment in English language learning among Iranian language learners is shaped by a combination of factors, including parental influence, socio-economic considerations, technology, and the global status of English. The influence of family and

parents, the pursuit of capital, socio-economic factors, technological associations, and the recognition of English as an international language all contribute to the motivations and beliefs of Iranian language learners regarding English language learning. Although participants acknowledged English as a global language, they distinguished it from the wider influences of globalisation. English was viewed as a linguistic tool for communication and knowledge access, whereas globalisation was associated with political and economic shifts, some of which were met with scepticism or resistance.

Acting purposively (Agency)

Agency in this study emerged as learners' capacity to make strategic choices in the face of structural constraints. For example, Amirhossein deliberately used English in online political forums to address international audiences: *"I want them to know what's happening here, directly from us, not from the news"*. Such purposeful action reflects the interplay between identity construction and access to global communicative spaces. Mohamad Reza stated, *"I am learning English for travelling and to immigrate to a foreign country; to live and use English for a job, business and pass my exams in both university and high school"*. English language learning can invoke learners' curiosity. Hanieh spoke of her endeavour to learn about foreign religions, *"I was curious but there were no books, there were no sources in Persian, so I had to use my English, and it helped me a lot because there were some unique versions of that thing that I wanted to learn"* (Hanieh). She expanded *"sometimes when I want to learn something ... when there are not Iranian versions of that thing that I am going to learn, I use English"*. English is not just an international language to learn about other countries. The participants suggested that learning and using English helped them to gain a better understanding of their own country and situation by expanding their worldviews.

According to Holland et al. (1998), learners construct their identities through contemplations and interactions with others in a dialogic and dialectic manner. Drawing upon the views of Bakhtin and Vygotsky, Holland et al. (1998) argue that our existence is rooted in practice, and we continually author the meaning of our actions. However, this process of meaning-making is influenced by our surroundings, as we engage with pre-existing materials in the world and negotiate with both internal and external voices. Language learning, as a new resource for self-dialogue, significantly impacts identity formation. Voloshinov emphasises the importance of considering external factors that shape the word and its meaning for a comprehensive analysis of language (Parrington, 1997). This holds true for Iranians learning English or any other language, as language cannot be detached from its cultural and contextual aspects.

Examining the effects of learning and practising English sheds light on how language can influence identity work and learners' development. Scholars adopting a dialogical approach inspired by Bakhtin's Circle describe learners' development as a process of acquiring diverse ways of perceiving the world (Dufva et al., 2014). In the context of this study, learning English and learners' investment in the language engage Iranian language learners in dialogues with others and themselves, leading to the formation of new understandings, perspectives, and the

reproduction of existing ideologies. Learning about different cultures is often a contradictory and ambivalent experience, characterised by varying degrees of identity transformation.

Discussion

The findings of this study are interpreted through Darvin and Norton's (2016) investment model, which conceptualises identity, capital, and ideology as interconnected dimensions influencing language learning. In the Iranian context, these factors operated simultaneously, shaping and being shaped by learners' investment in English.

Learners' identities appeared dynamic and negotiable, moving between local cultural affiliations and global aspirations. English functioned as a tool for imagining new social roles, such as being a global citizen, professional specialist, or political advocate, while also reinforcing aspects of Iranian cultural identity. This fluidity aligns with Norton's (2013) notion that identity is multiple and constantly evolving depending on context. Participants' narratives revealed that English could both challenge and affirm their sense of belonging depending on the situation and interlocutors.

Participants also pursued various forms of capital through their engagement with English. Economic capital was linked to career opportunities and access to international markets; cultural capital was gained through exposure to global knowledge and media; social capital expanded through networks of friends, colleagues, and online communities. These motivations persisted despite restrictive policy environments, supporting Bourdieu's (1991) idea of language as symbolic capital convertible into broader resources.

Government discourses that portrayed English as a threat to cultural and ideological integrity created a contested learning space. Although some participants acknowledged these narratives, most resisted by redefining English as a means of empowerment and global engagement. This ideological negotiation demonstrates learners' active agency in challenging dominant language ideologies to claim ownership over their learning (Moharami, 2021).

Overall, identity, capital, and ideology interacted to shape learners' investment in English. Shifts in identity were often linked with acquiring new forms of capital, while ideological beliefs influenced both identity and the perceived value of English. Recognising this complex interplay helps explain how learners navigate structural constraints while exercising agency, highlighting the importance of educational and policy frameworks that address the nuanced realities of language investment in politically restrictive contexts.

The implications for Iranian society

Learners recognised that using English on a global scale brings numerous benefits and practical applications, even within Iran. The interview data revealed that learning English can serve as

a valuable resource for Iranians to connect with the international community. Motivated by the belief in the advantages it brings, the participants are actively engaged in learning English. These advantages can be both materialistic, such as job opportunities, education, and skill development, as well as non-materialistic, such as enjoying movies, music, reading books, and exploring new perspectives.

Numerous studies highlight that English is viewed by most Iranians as a means to distance themselves from an unsatisfactory socio-economic environment (Ghorbani & Khajavy, 2023; Moharami, 2024). This perspective reflects a power dynamic between language learners and their local needs. Iranians have come to perceive the English language as a pathway to a better life, both financially and socially. The current economic conditions and imposed sanctions on Iran further emphasise the symbolic power of English, as described by Bourdieu (1991), whereby English holds economic dominance over other languages within Iranian society. The participants, including Mahdi, Shirin, Bahram, and Mohammad-Reza, echo this sentiment, illustrating the contrast between Iranian doctrine and the social life of Iranians. English has become an integral part of Iranian society, underscoring the fact that mere policy changes and regulations are insufficient to compel language learning if the language cannot be effectively integrated into daily life.

The English language has deeply permeated various aspects of the participants' lives, presenting lifelong opportunities. Iranian language learners encounter dynamic local and global forces that foster the learning of English and enable their integration into a broader community. The experience of learning English shapes their local and global perspectives. According to the participants, proficiency in English facilitates inclusion in a global society and provides a means to express their voices on a global scale. The desire to be heard and to become part of a larger community is not solely a consequence of the globalisation of English in Iran but is also influenced by their social, cultural, and historical backgrounds, as well as their activities, which shape their perception of English and its associated benefits in Iran.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate how adult Iranians invest in English language learning and the associated cultural and societal factors. Using a case study approach, factors were identified that play a crucial role in determining language learners' commitment to learning the English language. These factors include the longstanding presence of English in Iran, learners' perceptions shaped by their parents and social environment, the socio-economic environment of the country, the inseparable connection between English and technological development, and the global acceptance of English. The findings demonstrate a dynamic interaction between local and global factors that shape language learners' investment in learning English.

The study explored investment in English language learning for adult Iranians positioning it against the backdrop of English globalisation. The findings of this study elucidate the presence

of English language learners' interests as an interactive process between learners and their environment. The significance of both local and global factors in shaping the motivations of adult Iranians for learning English was discussed. These local factors influence participants' perceptions and investment in the language.

The study reveals that Iranian English language learners possess an understanding of and connection with their environment, which informs their interest in learning English. Each participant had distinct purposes for learning English driven by their individual needs, perceptions of the language, and its benefits in Iranian society. Examining learners' views and motivations for learning English reflects their imagined advantages of incorporating English into their lives. Imagination allows participants to envision themselves in a world that brings new opportunities and meanings (Wenger, 2010). Therefore, the increased interest of Iranian language learners in learning English is not solely shaped by the hegemony of English or imposed convergence; rather, local factors play a significant role in shaping the commitment of adult Iranian English learners to the language.

The significance of this study lies in the conceptual approach to language learning and identity formation. Globalisation and the perceived hegemony of English suggest the notion of an external force imposing its power on nations to integrate Western culture and language.

Islam holds a central position in Iranian politics, shaping language learning policies (Rassouli & Osam, 2019), and Iranian officials are concerned about potential shifts in the Iranian-Islamic identity of language learners. The perceived hegemonic influence of English poses a threat to Iranian authorities, who employ language policy to promote specific views, beliefs, and perceptions among Iranians to shape an Iranian society that aligns with their concerns (Rashidi & Hosseini, 2019). This study sheds light on the perceived disconnect between these political expectations regarding the experience of learning English and the everyday needs and desires of the participants. Changes in learners' cultural practices and their interest in learning English, as observed in this study, are influenced by their interaction with the environment and their understanding of languages. As Bahram emphasises, to effectively engage with the local and global environment, "*we are going to need this [English] language*".

Conflict of interest

The authors unequivocally state no conflicts of interest in their article. Additionally, they employ rigorous research tools, such as triangulation, to minimise any potential impact on the reported data. This meticulous approach not only ensures data integrity but also enhances the overall credibility of their study within the academic community.

Ethics approval

This study emanates from a PhD thesis and has received ethical approval from Monash University, Australia. Monash University's ethical approval affirms that the study adheres to rigorous ethical considerations, ensuring the protection and well-being of participants involved.

AI acknowledgment

The authors used ChatGPT and Grammarly Premium solely for language refinement and sentence structuring. AI was not employed for literature review development, data analysis, interpretation, or conceptual framing. Its role was limited to enhancing readability, reducing wordiness, and ensuring clarity in phrasing across the manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the final work, which reflects their ideas and upholds academic integrity.

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Appendix

Interview questions

1. Background information: age, university education, job.
2. Could you please tell me about your language-learning experiences and the reason for choosing English as your foreign language?
3. Do your family members support your English language learning?
4. What are the benefits of learning English for you?
5. Do you believe English fluency will assist you with further study or work opportunities? If so, how?
6. Is there any gender segregation in your language school? How does it affect your learning?
7. Where and how often do you use English language knowledge?
8. What are some of the challenges of learning English for you? Are there any social obstacles for your language learning in Iran?
9. Are there any cultural factors affecting your English language learning process?
10. What does being an Iranian mean to you?
11. Do you think English language learning has influenced your understanding of your culture or your worldview?
12. Would you recommend English language learning? To whom? Why?

Mehdi Moharami is a recent PhD graduate from the Faculty of Education at Monash University. His main research focus is on the impact of English language learning on language learners' identity formation and practices. Mehdi is interested in cultural studies, TESOL, teaching language skills, along integrating language learning with social practices.

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She takes an interdisciplinary collaborative approach to research, engaging with other disciplines, universities and a range of industry partners.

Alex Kostogriz is a Professor of Languages Education in the Faculty of Education, Monash University. His research is based on sociocultural approaches to learning and teaching and centres on two overarching goals. The first is to understand the conditions by which students' involvement in various classroom practices is shaped, and how such involvement affects both what is learned and how it is learned. The second is to use this understanding to help create effective classroom communities of learners and inform teaching practices. Alex's publications are focused on teacher education reforms, professional practice and ethics, and the experiences of beginning teachers.