FROM LOCAL STUDENTS TO GLOBAL PARTICIPANTS: ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN A PROVINCIAL VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY

Pham Thi Ngoc Mai[1,2]
Email: pham.mai@daihoclongan.edu.vn, ORCID: 0009-0006-5725-3668

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Abstract: *Amid the intertwining discourses of nationalism and globalization, this qualitative study examines how students at a regional Vietnamese university create and negotiate their English-related identities. The study examines how students envision using English to participate in international communities in the future, drawing on Norton's idea of identity investment and Jenkins' work on English as a Lingua Franca. Ten Long An University undergraduates participated in semi-structured interviews, which were then thematically analyzed. Results indicate that students envision themselves as future global professionals while maintaining strong local identities. Rather than a sign of cultural replacement, English is seen as a strategic resource for adaptability. However, perceived linguistic legitimacy, institutional restrictions, and unequal access to educational resources shape identity. By highlighting how global English identities are negotiated in resource-limited higher education settings, the study advances both identity research and English as a Lingua Franca.*

Keywords: *English as a Lingua Franca, identity construction, global identities, identity investment, Vietnamese higher education; globalization.*

I. Introduction

The global spread of English has profoundly affected education, the economy, and sociocultural life in many parts of the world. English is no longer confined to its countries of origin; it is now the dominant language of international communication across many domains. Consequently, scholars have tended to see English as a global lingua franca used by multilingual speakers across national boundaries rather than simply as a foreign language (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2011). In this paradigm, native speakers do not own English; users worldwide negotiate and reshape it. From an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) perspective, Jenkins (2007) and Seidlhofer (2011) argue that traditional norm-based models that privilege Inner Circle varieties are challenged. Rather than conformity to British or American norms, ELF research focuses on intelligibility, accommodation, and communicative effectiveness in

[1] Research student, Hanoi Open University, Hanoi, Vietnam
[2] Long An University of Economics and Industry, Tay Ninh, Vietnam

multilingual interaction. This shift from standardized norms to interactional practices has profound implications not only for pedagogy, but also for identity.

Learning a language is never purely cognitive; it is inextricably tied to how people orient themselves in social worlds. In the era of globalization, English is closely tied to mobility, modernity, and career advancement. Thus, learners do not merely acquire linguistic competence; rather, they construct identities through their engagement with English. When students see themselves as capable of using English in international contexts, motivation becomes intrinsically linked with identity construction. By contrast, local universities get less notice, especially in developing or transitional economies where globalization pressures meet limited resources and strong local affiliations. These contexts offer a unique site for investigating how global discourses of English are interpreted, negotiated, and localized.

Vietnam is a particularly interesting case. Meanwhile, Vietnamese remains central to national identity, cultural continuity, and political sovereignty. English thus occupies a dual position: a medium of global participation and a foreign linguistic resource within national structures. This dual positioning creates a productive tension in higher education between nationalism and globalization. The tension is especially evident at local universities like Long An University (LAU). These institutions are often in less-urbanized areas and serve rural or lower-middle-income students. Students may not get the best quality of instruction in English, and they may not have the chance to have real international interaction." But more students are expected to meet English exit standards and are encouraged to picture themselves in global careers. In particular, little research has explored how students negotiate the move from 'local' identities to 'global' aspirations in contexts where opportunities for international exposure are unevenly distributed. This gap is particularly salient in Vietnam, where English is institutionally promoted but socially stratified. To address this gap, this study examines how undergraduate students at a local university in Vietnam construct and negotiate English-related identities. Using a qualitative approach and drawing on ELF and identity theory, this research aims to illuminate how learners imagine, perform, and sometimes struggle with their emergent global identities. More specifically, the study asks: *What are LAU students' conceptions of English user identities? What are their plans for their involvement with global communities? How are these identity constructions shaped by institutional expectations and socioeconomic conditions?* The study adds to our understanding of global English identities in higher education from a context-sensitive perspective and focuses on learner voices.

II. Literature Review

2.1. English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

The conceptualization of English has changed dramatically over the last thirty years. Previous frameworks such as World Englishes have focused on the legitimacy of localized, institutionalized varieties of English, especially in postcolonial contexts (Kachru, 1985). In contrast, ELF scholarship treats English as a communicative resource multilingual speakers use across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Jenkins (2007) and Seidlhofer (2011), among others, suggest that ELF interactions prioritize intelligibility, accommodation, and the negotiation of meaning over native-speaker norms. For this perspective, normativity

is not inherited but co-constructed. This conversation has been expanded from theoretical reconceptualization to educational practice in recent Global Englishes research. Using mixed-methods research from five higher education contexts, including Vietnam, Baker et al. (2025) examined the relationship between English education and marginalization, empowerment, and unequal access to educational opportunities. Their research shows the importance of viewing English not just as a language resource, but also in light of students' socioeconomic status, rural location, and chances to pursue higher education.

Today, most English users are not native speakers but people who use it to communicate across borders (Jenkins, 2015). This demographic reality shows that English is no longer "owned" by a single nation but is a shared resource shaped by its global users. Seidlhofer (2005, p.339) noted that English as a lingua franca is "*a way of referring to communication in English between speakers with different first languages*." In this way, ELF bridges cultural and linguistic differences, enabling dialogue that would otherwise be difficult or impossible. In the context of this study, ELF is viewed as a shared communication tool that allows students to interact with individuals from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This viewpoint focuses on how LAU students view English, envision their involvement in larger communities, and manage the tension between local identity and global goals.

2.2. Identity in language learning

Research on identity in language learning has shifted from a static sense of cultural belonging to a dynamic, relational understanding. Previous approaches have tended to treat identity as relatively fixed, and associated with ethnicity, nationality or first language. Norton (2013) argues that learners engage in language learning when they believe it will give them better access to symbolic and material resources. These frameworks intersect in global English contexts. Learners can see themselves as global professionals, international scholars, or transnational employees. English bridges to these dreamed-of futures. But these imaginings are not evenly spread. However, structural constraints such as socioeconomic background, educational resources, and institutional support mediate the plausibility of these futures. Recent scholarship has therefore stressed the importance of investigating identity construction in specific contexts rather than assuming universal direction. Identity is not just an internal psychological state, but a negotiated positioning in local and global discourses.

2.3. Global identities and the local-global relationship

Globalization makes the relation between language and identity more complex. English is frequently linked to cosmopolitanism, mobility, and modernity. But global identity does not necessarily replace local identity. Instead, identities are layered and hybrid. In ELF contexts, global identities are built through interaction. Speakers position themselves as competent participants in transnational networks while remaining locally grounded. The dual positioning reflects the coexistence of nationalism and globalization. In many societies, English serves as a vehicle for international integration rather than a replacement for national language and identity. Instead, it can be conceptualized as an orientation towards participation in wider

communities that may coexist with, and be negotiated alongside, locally grounded affiliations.

However, global identity is constructed unevenly. English proficiency may be linguistic capital, opening access to academic publication, job opportunities, and social mobility. Students from privileged backgrounds tend to have greater access to quality instruction and international exposure, which helps them construct confident global identities. In this study, students' ambitions, perceptions, and experiences with the English language represent global identity, defined as an evolving, context-dependent orientation toward participation in transnational communities.

2.4. Local higher education and unequal globalization

Stories of globalization usually focus on big cities, but provincial institutions experience it differently. Universities outside large urban centers may feel pressure to internationalize, but without the same resources. Everyone may have the same English exit requirements, publication expectations, accreditation requirements, etc., but the capacity to meet them varies widely. In this context, local universities like LAU play a special role for first-generation students who may not have had much exposure to international environments. English is a challenge and an opportunity for these learners. Global participation is supposed, but not necessarily easy. However, little research examines how students at local Vietnamese universities construct their identities in relation to English as a global lingua franca in this context. Most existing studies are either conducted in major cities or focus on institutional policy analysis rather than learners' perspectives. As a result, the lived experiences of students negotiating local grounding and global aspiration remain underexplored.

2.5. The research gap

Existing scholarship provides important but partly distinct perspectives on English, identity, and global participation. In brief, three bodies of scholarship are of particular relevance: (1) ELF studies that focus on fluid, negotiated norms; (2) identity and investment theory that focus on the role of imagined futures; and (3) globalization studies that focus on the local-global relationship. However, these strands have not been integrated in the context of provincial higher education in Vietnam, except in a few cases. How these viewpoints can be used to explain identity construction in a provincial Vietnamese higher education setting is the theoretical gap that this study aims to fill. Specifically, little research examines how students negotiate identity through English learning in the ELF realities of non-elite institutions with limited resources. This study aims to fill this gap by examining how students at a local university in Vietnam construct identity and how they move from local students to global participants, discursively and imaginatively. The study foregrounds learner narratives to promote a more nuanced understanding of global English identities beyond metropolitan and elite settings.

III. Methodology

3.1. Research design and context

The study adopts a qualitative approach, assuming identity is socially constructed, relational, and contextual. Rather than quantifying motivation, the study examines how students narrate and position themselves in relation to English within the larger discourses of globalization and national belonging. This qualitative approach suits investigating how students negotiate their identities

within a specific institutional and sociolinguistic framework, as well as the meanings they ascribe to English. The research was carried out at LAU, a local university in Southern Vietnam. The institution primarily serves local students, many of whom come from rural or lower-middle-income backgrounds. English is compulsory, and students must meet institutional exit standards aligned with national proficiency standards.

3.2. Participants

The study participants were 10 undergraduate students at Long An University, Vietnam. Purposive sampling was used to choose participants, allowing the researcher to find cases with a wealth of information pertinent to the study's focus on identity building, global aspirations, and English use. The study selected 10 participants because of its narrow focus and emphasis on detailed qualitative accounts rather than numerical representativeness. The sampling strategy sought variation in students' academic years (Years 1-4), majors, self-reported English proficiency, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This strategy enabled the study to capture a wide range of experiences and perspectives on English language learning and identity construction in a provincial university context. Before data collection, all participants provided informed consent and were informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality. This paper used pseudonyms throughout to protect participants' identities.

3.3. Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese so participants could express their experiences, beliefs, and reflections in a familiar language. While allowing the interviewer to address concerns raised by specific participants, the semi-structured style provided a standard set of guiding questions. This method encouraged attention to variations in students' experiences and comparability across participants. The interviews examined participants' self-perceptions as English speakers, their imagined plans for English, their motivations and challenges in learning the language, their perceptions of the legitimacy and ownership of English as a global lingua franca, and their reflections on the relationship between national and emerging global identities. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim in Vietnamese and translated into English. The translated excerpts were carefully corroborated to preserve the original meanings and used for thematic analysis and reporting.

3.4. Data analysis

The interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. The analysis began with repeated readings of the interview transcripts to become familiar with the data. The codes were then systematically reviewed, compared, and organized into broader themes that reflected common patterns across participants' experiences. Cross-case comparisons identified similarities and differences in perspectives and deepened understanding of how students navigated English-related identities in the context of globalization. Then the themes that emerged were interpreted through the theoretical lenses of ELF, Norton's (2013) concept of identity investment, and Anderson's (2006) notion of imagined communities. Finally, the coding was completed iteratively and reflexively to

improve the analysis's trustworthiness. Themes were refined continuously through ongoing engagement with the data and comparison with relevant theoretical frameworks.

IV. Findings

The analysis uncovered a complex pattern of both empowerment and constraint in the manner students constructed their identity through English. Participants identified English as a key resource for expanding educational, professional, and intercultural opportunities. Still, they also experienced tensions arising from linguistic insecurity, institutional expectations, and the dominance of native-speaker norms. The analysis revealed four interrelated themes: (1) Locally Grounded, Globally Imagined Selves, in which students maintained a strong attachment to their local and national identities but also imagined themselves as participants in global communities; (2) English as Mobility Capital, emphasizing English as a strategic resource for academic success, career advancement, and international engagement; (3) Linguistic Insecurity and Perceived Illegitimacy, highlighting participants' concerns over language proficiency and perceived legitimacy of their English use; and (4) Negotiating National Belonging and Global Aspiration, showing students' ongoing balancing of loyalty to their cultural heritage and aspiration to become competent global communicators.

4.1. Locally grounded, globally imagined selves

Participants consistently described themselves as strongly rooted in local and national identities while simultaneously imagining global futures. Many students expressed aspirations to work for multinational companies, travel abroad, or collaborate internationally. For example, S1 (Year 3) stated:

"*I am from Long An, and I am proud of that. But I think English will help me connect with the world. I don't want to leave my identity; I want to expand it*."

This illustrates layered identity construction rather than replacement. Students did not frame English as cultural assimilation but as expansion of participation. Several participants described their "future self" as more confident English users interacting with foreigners.

4.2. English as mobility capital

Throughout the interviews, participants consistently positioned English as mobility capital that could open educational and socioeconomic opportunities. For students, English was not merely an academic subject but a strategic resource for securing higher-paying jobs, jobs in foreign-invested enterprises, and career opportunities beyond the local labour market. These perceptions reflected a future-oriented investment in English, linking language learning to aspirations for upward social mobility and participation in broader professional networks. As S2, a second-year student, said:

If I only stay in Long An, maybe English is not very needed. "But if I want a better job, especially in a big company, I need to know English.

S2's story reveals how students constructed the value of English around their imagined career paths rather than their immediate local environment. English was not created as a sign of cultural assimilation or belonging to English-speaking communities, but as a practical tool for accessing broader educational and occupational opportunities.

In this sense, English was an investment in future possibilities; it reinforced learners' aspirations to join increasingly globalized labor markets.

Nevertheless, participants also acknowledged that opportunities to learn English were not evenly distributed. Some students benefited from private tuition, online courses or other learning resources, while others depended solely on university teaching. These differences affected learners' confidence in using English and, in turn, their perceived preparedness to participate in global academic and professional communities. The findings then suggest that English is not simply mobility capital, but a resource whose value is mediated by unequal access to learning opportunities and institutional support.

4.3. Linguistic insecurity and perceived illegitimacy

Despite their aspirations to become competent English users, many participants expressed persistent feelings of linguistic insecurity. Rather than evaluating their English in terms of communicative effectiveness, students often measured their proficiency against idealized native-speaker standards or the perceived competence of students from larger urban universities. Such comparisons often undermined their confidence and limited their willingness to participate in English-mediated interactions. As S3, a fourth-year student, reflected:

"When I hear someone speak English very fluently, I feel I am not good enough. Maybe English is not for people like me."

Although participants generally acknowledged that English functions as an international means of communication among speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds, many still equated legitimate English use with native-like fluency and accuracy. This internalization of hierarchical language norms constrained their confidence and weakened their sense of entitlement to participate in global English-speaking communities. Students from rural backgrounds further emphasized that limited opportunities for authentic English interaction intensified these feelings of inadequacy. Several participants described experiencing anxiety when speaking English in public, fearing negative evaluation from peers or teachers. Consequently, identity construction emerged as a dynamic process of negotiation in which aspirations for global participation coexisted with self-doubt, perceived linguistic deficiency, and unequal access to communicative opportunities. These findings suggest that learners' global identities are shaped not only by their personal aspirations but also by prevailing language ideologies and the sociocultural conditions in which English is learned and used.

4.4. Negotiating national belonging and global aspiration

One interesting finding was that none of the participants saw learning English as a threat to their Vietnamese identity. Instead, participants framed English as a resource that enabled engagement with the wider world while supporting, rather than replacing, their sense of national belonging. Students viewed English as a way to represent Vietnam on the international stage, not as a way to sever ties with their cultural heritage. S4 said: "As a first-year student,

"English does not change me. I'm Vietnamese. But English helps me to present Vietnam to the world."

Her reflection illustrates an additive process of identity construction

in which local and global identities complement rather than conflict. At the same time, participants noted that identity construction was influenced not only by institutional expectations but also by personal aspirations. Some students said they studied English mainly to meet degree requirements, not necessarily to study intercultural communication or travel abroad. These accounts illustrate the complex relationship between individual agency and structural constraints and indicate that learners' global identities are constructed through constant negotiation among personal ambitions, educational policies, and the realities of their learning environment.

V. Discussion

The study examined how students at a local Vietnamese university negotiated their English-related identities within the intersecting discourses of nationalism and globalization. Findings show a complex and multilayered process in which empowerment and constraint are interwoven. Students see themselves as global citizens but remain rooted in local and national identities. However, this expansion of identity is uneven and shaped by institutional structures and socioeconomic differences. Research on English language instruction in Vietnamese higher education also provides relevant contextual insights. Research published in the Journal of Science Hanoi Open University has looked at lecturers' translanguaging techniques in English-medium instruction (Bùi, 2024) and students' perspectives on learning intercultural communication (Lê et al., 2021). These findings have important implications for language policy and higher education practice in provincial contexts.

5.1. Rethinking English policy beyond urban-centric models

The findings show that students at local Vietnamese universities actively construct global identities by imagining futures beyond their local communities. Participants viewed English not as a foreign cultural intrusion, but rather as a strategic resource for educational progress, professional mobility, and intercultural engagement. The study also points to the contextual nature of identity construction. These structural constraints affected not only their confidence in using English, but also their perceptions of linguistic legitimacy and their imagined participation in global communities. The results have important implications for English language policy and higher education in Vietnam. National policies that require uniform English proficiency standards across all institutions may unintentionally mask significant regional disparities in educational resources and learning opportunities. Local universities need more institutional support to enable more equitable participation in global education, including greater investment in language-learning infrastructure, stronger partnerships with international universities, more virtual exchange opportunities, and targeted scholarships for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Such efforts would make English not just a graduation requirement, but an authentic path to intercultural engagement and global participation. Without acknowledging these structural inequalities, standardized language policies may reinforce existing educational inequalities rather than support inclusive internationalization.

5.2. From native-speaker norms to ELF-informed pedagogy

While ELF scholarship has increasingly acknowledged that diverse users collectively own English,

many participants in this study continued to evaluate their language competence against idealized native-speaker norms. This finding indicates that even when English is primarily used as a lingua franca between non-native speakers, learners' dominant language ideologies remain firmly rooted in perceptions of linguistic legitimacy. These findings have significant pedagogical implications for teaching English in local Vietnamese universities. First, English language curricula need to incorporate ELF awareness more explicitly to help students see English as a shared international resource rather than the exclusive property of native speakers. Second, learners should be exposed to a wider range of English varieties and accents to reflect the linguistic diversity of global communication and to reduce the dependence on native-speaker norms as the only measure of proficiency. Third, classroom practices should focus on intelligibility, communicative effectiveness, and intercultural competence rather than on imitating accents or achieving grammatical perfection. Such an approach is likely to reinforce learners' confidence and produce a greater sense of legitimacy as English users.

The results also emphasize the need to reform teacher education programs in local universities. Preparing future teachers of English with ELF-informed pedagogies can contribute to addressing the challenge of native-speaker ideologies, more inclusive conceptions of language competence, and the creation of learning environments in which students are encouraged to participate confidently in multilingual and multicultural communication. Thus, teacher education can play an important role in supporting learners' identity development and participation in global communities by reimagining English as a resource for communication rather than a standard of perfection.

5.3. Aligning assessment with identity development

Institutional English exit requirements played a double-edged role in students' identity construction. For some participants, the graduation requirement was a tangible goal that encouraged continued investment in learning English and solidified their aspirations for future academic and professional gains. But for others, the focus on meeting a proficiency standard turned English from a useful communicative resource into a test-driven obligation. These findings suggest assessment policies need to move beyond reliance on standardized language testing. More diverse assessment methods, such as communicative tasks, project-based learning, collaborative international activities, and authentic ELF interactions, would better reflect the communicative realities of English in multilingual contexts. In a broader policy context, assessment systems need to be aligned with the educational purpose of preparing students for a global world.

5.4. Reconciling national identity and global participation

An important finding of this study is that participants did not perceive learning English as diminishing their Vietnamese identity. Instead, students consistently expressed a strong sense of national belonging while simultaneously aspiring to participate in global academic, professional, and intercultural communities. These findings suggest that engagement with English and attachment to national identity are not mutually exclusive. Rather, participants constructed additive and hybrid identities

in which English functioned as a resource for global communication while their Vietnamese identity remained central to their sense of self.

This finding has important implications for language policy in Vietnam. Rather than framing the expansion of English education as a potential threat to national culture, policymakers may present English as a strategic resource for sharing Vietnamese culture, values, and perspectives with international audiences. This perspective positions English not as a vehicle for cultural replacement but as a means of strengthening Vietnam's participation in global dialogue while preserving local cultural identities.

VI. Implications and conclusion

The paper contributes to current debates on ELFs and identity construction, helping learners at a provincial university in Vietnam find their voice. It shows that the development of English identity is not linear and equally empowering. Instead, aspirations, institutional expectations, and structural inequalities shape it.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample of ten undergraduate students from a single provincial university limits the results' applicability to other higher education settings. Second, the results reflect participants' self-reported experiences and perspectives because semi-structured interviews were the only data-collection technique; no additional data sources were used to triangulate the results. Researcher subjectivity and hindsight interpretation may affect participant stories and the analysis. The policy implications extend beyond LAU. In settings where English is used to access globalization, policymakers need to consider how standardization intersects with unequal resources. Local institutions need context-sensitive support so that global English does not become a mechanism of exclusion. Future research may include comparative case studies across regional universities, longitudinal designs to track identity development over time, and teacher perspectives on ELF-informed pedagogy.

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TỪ SINH VIÊN ĐỊA PHƯƠNG ĐẾN CÔNG DÂN TOÀN CẦU: TIẾNG ANH NHƯ NGÔN NGỮ CHUNG VÀ QUÁ TRÌNH XÂY DỰNG BẢN SẮC TẠI MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC ĐỊA PHƯƠNG CỦA VIỆT NAM

Phạm Thị Ngọc Mai[1,2]

Tóm tắt: *Trong bối cảnh các diễn ngôn đan xen giữa chủ nghĩa dân tộc và toàn cầu hóa, nghiên cứu định tính này điều tra cách sinh viên tại một trường đại học khu vực của Việt Nam tạo dựng và thương lượng bản sắc liên quan đến tiếng Anh của họ. Nghiên cứu xem xét cách sinh viên hình dung việc sử dụng tiếng Anh để tham gia vào cộng đồng quốc tế trong tương lai, dựa trên ý tưởng về đầu tư bản sắc của Norton và công trình của Jenkins về tiếng Anh như một ngôn ngữ chung (English as a Lingua Franca). Mười sinh viên đại học đã tham gia phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc, sau đó được phân tích theo chủ đề. Kết quả cho thấy sinh viên hình dung mình là những chuyên gia toàn cầu trong tương lai, trong khi vẫn duy trì bản sắc địa phương mạnh mẽ. Thay vì được coi là dấu hiệu của sự thay thế văn hóa, tiếng Anh được xem là một nguồn lực chiến lược cho khả năng thích ứng. Tuy nhiên, tính hợp pháp về ngôn ngữ, những hạn chế của thể chế và sự bất bình đẳng trong tiếp cận các nguồn lực giáo dục đều đóng vai trò là những yếu tố trung gian định hình bản sắc. Bằng cách làm nổi bật cách thức các bản sắc tiếng Anh toàn cầu được thương lượng trong môi trường giáo dục đại học với nguồn lực hạn chế, nghiên cứu này thúc đẩy cả nghiên cứu về bản sắc tiếng Anh như một ngôn ngữ chung.*

Từ khóa*: Tiếng Anh như ngôn ngữ chung, xây dựng bản sắc, bản sắc toàn cầu, giáo dục đại học Việt Nam, toàn cầu hóa.*

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[1] Nghiên cứu sinh, Trường Đại học Mở Hà Nội, Hà Nội, Việt Nam
[2] Trường Đại học Kinh tế Công nghiệp Long An, Tây Ninh, Việt Nam