EXPLORING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' INVESTMENT IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract. Being able to use English fluently has become a priority for students since proficient English users have a wide range of opportunities to develop their education and careers. Nevertheless, the process of English language learning is challenging and complex, which requires students to make a significant investment of time, effort, and motivation in English language learning. This study aims to explore students' investment in English language learning at a high school in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. A quantitative approach was employed to collect data from a group of 94 tenth-grade students completing a questionnaire. The obtained data were processed in terms of descriptive statistics. The results indicated that students' investment in English language learning was at a low level. They did not invest much time, effort, and money in commitment to language learning, identity, resources, and agency in English language learning. This study suggests pedagogical implications to booster students' investment in English language learning in the research context and other similar ones.

Keywords: Agency, English language learning, identity, investment, resource.

1. Introduction

English in Vietnam is seen as an essential language, and the government has recognized this by including it in the subjects to study. The government of Vietnam has stated in the Law of the National Education System of Vietnam, enacted in 2018, that English is considered a foreign language that students must learn from junior high school until university level [1]. Vietnamese currently consider English a vital foreign language, particularly for young people, due to how swiftly Vietnam has evolved and how globalisation is touching more and more people's lives. English helps Vietnam get along with other countries and work together on business issues [2-5]; it is one of the most important subjects in Vietnamese schools, and corporations look for candidates who can speak English [6].

The General Education English Curriculum (the GEEC) is a national-level curriculum designed for three levels of Vietnamese general education: primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary. It was promulgated on December 26, 2018 by the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam (MOET). The GEEC is the first curriculum which exercises MOET'S policy of "one curriculum, multiple textbooks." Since the GEEC was approved, many implementation activities

have been done, including training and retraining teachers to meet new English language proficiency standards, training teachers in new teaching methods and techniques, writing new textbooks and supplementary materials, renovating schools, improving teaching and learning equipment, and introducing new testing and examinations. The Vietnamese government believes secondary education should help students learn more deeply, work independently and creatively, and solve professional problems [7]. With the new teaching and learning methods, it is required the students have some certain changes in investment in learning English for example the investment might shift from memorization-focused studying to a more active and engaging experience, requiring a different kind of effort from students. New methods often encourage self-directed learning, requiring students to take ownership of their learning and invest time in finding resources outside of class. Finding the how students are invested in learning English is very vital because it might help teachers choose the suitable teaching methods for their students.

Previous studies [8-10] have indicated that learners' investment in English language learning has been conducted at different levels and in various contexts; however, there is a lack of research investigating the investment in English language learning among high school students in Vietnam. Therefore, this study aims to explore students' investment in English language learning at a high school in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. It addresses the following research question: *To what extent is high school EFL students' investment in English language learning?*

2. Content

2.1. Investment in English Language Learning

Investment is a commitment to objectives, techniques, and linkages encompassing the learning process, continually contested in various power relationships. Investment refers to a student's social and historical relationship to a target language and sometimes contradictory motivations to learn and utilise it [11-12]. According to Norton [13], investment requires a commitment from both the students and the community of practice inside and outside the classroom. Students are more likely to invest with those who represent or provide access to the imagined community, including public professionals and local homemakers.

Investment in language learning is a dynamic process influenced by the student's interactions with speakers and learners of the target language. It is closely connected to the students' construction and negotiation of their identity as they acquire the language, determining the specific roles and identities they wish to adopt in different situations [14-16]. Darvin and Norton [17] argue that investing in language acquisition encompasses dedication to the objectives, engagement in practice, and formation of identities that shape the learning process. These elements are constantly contested within various social connections and frameworks of power.

The components of the investment in language learning are composed of students' commitment to language learning, identity, resources, and agency [8]. Student's commitment to language learning shows the extent to which English language students are interested in learning English and time, energy, and money should be spent on learning English; student's identity indicates the dynamic identity in learning English and their future direction in learning English; student's resources refer to the benefits (e.g., economic capital, cultural capital, social capital) invested for English language learning; student's agency shows how much students realize themselves as accountable for language learning [8].

Research on investment in English language learning has been found in the literature review; however, this research area is still underexplored. Chan's [9] research looked at how much time and work Cambodian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at the University of Battambang spent learning the language. A mixed methods were used to gather data. At first, 80 college students answered a questionnaire. Then, four sets of in-depth group conversations with

twenty students were conducted. The study results showed that learning English had changed how Cambodian students saw English as a way to improve their lives, jobs, wages, and social standing, which may affect their identities and resources. Another research conducted by Novrianti [18] examined university students' views on English as a capital for their future advantages in the context of Indonesia. This study interviewed six high school and college students who studied English as a foreign language to evaluate the transfer of the English language to cultural capital and their English language investment. The results indicated that employment motivated participants most to learn English, and students allocated time to English language learning for their future jobs. In the Vietnamese context, Tran and Luong [19] studied students' imagined community and identity and their investment in English language learning. A group of 100 university students joined in a survey, and 20 of them were invited for interviews. They found that students imagined their community and identity positively, and they spent much time, money, and effort on English language learning. In short, it is noticed that students' investment in English language learning has been extensively explored. Most of the studies were conducted at the tertiary level, and a gap in high school students' investment in English language learning is found. To that end, this study endeavours to fill in this gap by exploring high school students' investment in English language learning in an EFL context like Vietnam.

2.2. Methodology

2.2.1. Research Context and Participants.

This study employed the quantitative approach to collect the data by using a questionnaire, which can reduce the potential for bias in data analysis [20-21]. The study was conducted at a High School in Binh Tan District, Ho Chi Minh City. Students at this school have to take three main periods (each lasting 45 minutes) of English weekly, and the main English textbook is *Tieng Anh 10* (Friends Global). The study recruited a group of 94 10th-grade students by a convenience sampling technique to answer the questionnaire. Among 94 students, most of them (94.6%) have learned English for more than five years, and more than half (52.1%) have taken English courses at English language centers.

2.1.2. Research Instrument

The closed-ended questionnaire was used for data collection. The questionnaire was adapted from Soltanian et al. [8] because their questionnaire was designed and validated, and it is suitable for the scope of this study. Their questionnaire focuses on students' components of the investment (commitment to language learning, identity, resources, and agency), and it has been validated. The questionnaire is composed of 22 items divided into four aspects: (1) Student's commitment to language learning (3 items); (2) Student's identity (4 items); (3) Student's resources (7 items); (4) Student's agency (8 items).

A five-point Likert scale (from *Never* to *Very frequently*) was used to explore students' investment in English language learning. The questionnaire was designed in English, and it was then translated into Vietnamese so that respondents would not have any difficulties in understanding the language used. The Cronbach's Alpha of the questionnaire was .88, which indicates that the questionnaire was very reliable.

2.1.3. Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to the official data collection, the research instrument was piloted with five students who shared similar background information with those in the main study. This is to validate the research instrument. Some modifications to the research instrument in terms of language use and content were made. The official questionnaire was administered to the target students. The explanations of the research purposes and questionnaire content were also given to students. It took them around 25 minutes to respond to all the items in the questionnaire.

Regarding the data analysis, the data were processed with the assistance of the SPSS software (Version 23). The descriptive statistics (M: mean; SD: standard deviation) were calculated. Initially, all the copies of the questionnaire were screened, and only valid responses were accepted. There were 94 valid copies of the questionnaire. The interval mean scores were interpreted as follows: 1.00 - 1.80: Never; 1.81 - 2.60: Rarely; 2.61 - 3.40: Occasionally; 3.41 - 4.20: Frequently; 4.21 - 5.00: Very frequently.

2.2. Results and Discussion

2.2.1 Results

Students' investment in English Language Learning

The results in Table 1 indicated the average mean score of four aspects of investment in English language learning was 2.15 out of five (SD=.98). This means that many students rarely invested in their English language learning. Among four aspects of investment in English language learning, students' investment in English language learning in terms of their commitment to language learning (M=2.41; SD=.95) seemed to be more frequent than other aspects of investment (identity: M=2.10, SD=1.16; agency: M=2.08, SD=1.20; resources: M=2.03, SD=1.13). In brief, the participants in this study were not frequently devoted to their investment in English language learning.

Table 1. Students' Investment in English Language Learning

Aspects	N= 94	
	M	*SD*
1. Commitment to language learning	2.41	.95
2. Identity	2.10	1.16
3. Resources	2.03	1.13
4. Agency	2.08	1.20
Average	**2.15**	**.98**

Students' investment in English language learning in terms of commitment to language learning

With respect to students' commitment to language learning including three items, Table 2 shows that most of students occasionally "[did their] homework to review what [they] learned in class" (item 1: M=2.81, SD=.91), but they rarely "[tried] to complete all the English exercises even if they [were] difficult" (item 2: M=2.27, SD=.95) and "[did] all the English exercises even if they [took] a long time" (item 3: M=2.11, SD=1.00). In conclusion, students did not get committed to language learning frequently.

Table 2. Students' Commitment to English Language Learning

Statements	N= 94	
	M	*SD*
1. I try to do my homework to review what I learned in class.	2.84	.91
2. I try to complete all the English exercises even if they are not difficult.	2.27	.95
3. I do all the English exercises even if they do not take a long time.	2.11	1.00

Students' Investment in English Language Learning in terms of Identity

As for identity, which consists of four items (Table 3), many students reported that they occasionally "[imagined] using English effectively to communicate with international friends or colleagues" (item 7: M=2.66, SD=1.32). Nevertheless, they seldom "[encouraged themselves] to speak English even when [they feared] making mistakes" (item 5: M=2.02, SD=1.24), "[adapted their] English to [their] English teachers or classmates" (item 4: M=1.82, SD=1.08). and "[tried] to change [their] learning habit to be autonomous in English language learning" (item 6: M=1.81,

SD=1.13). To sum up, students did not invest much in their English language learning in terms of their identity.

Table 3. Students' Investment in English Language Learning in terms of Identity

Statements	N= 94	
	M	SD
4. I adapt my English to my English teachers or classmates.	1.82	1.08
5. I encourage myself to speak English even when I fear making mistakes.	2.02	1.24
6. I try to change my learning habits to be autonomous in English language learning.	1.81	1.13
7. I imagine using English effectively to communicate with international friends or colleagues.	2.66	1.32

Students' Investment in English Language Learning in terms of Resources

Regarding Table 4 indicating resources (7 items), most of students occasionally "[listened] to English songs to improve English in free time" (item 14: M=3.03, SD=1.15) and "[watched] movies with English subtitles to improve [their] listening skills" (item 12: M=2.61, SD=1.18). However, it was noticed that they rarely "[purchased] physical or digital learning materials which [could] support [them] to learn English effectively (item 8: M=2.06, SD=1.23) and "[too] English classes at other institutions to enhance [their] English language learning" (item 13: M=1.96, SD=1.26). Surprisingly, many students never "[read] books in English to practice [their] English skills" (item 10: M=1.77, SD=1.12), "[accessed] to non-formal activities to learn English" (item 9: M=1.49, SD=1.18), and "[got] engaged in foreign news on TV, radio, newspaper or online sources to practice English skills" (item 11: M=1.31, SD=1.30). In brief, students invested in resources for English language learning at a very low level.

Table 4. Students' Investment in English Language Learning in terms of Resources

Statements	N= 94	
	M	SD
8. I purchase physical or digital learning materials that can support me to learn English effectively.	2.06	1.23
9. I have access to non-formal activities to learn English (e.g., paying fees to join club activities).	1.49	1.18
10. I read books in English to practice my English skills.	1.77	1.12
11. I get engaged in English news on TV, radio, newspaper, or online sources to practice English skills.	1.31	1.30
12. I watch movies with English subtitles to improve my listening skills.	2.61	1.18
13. I take English classes at other institutions to enhance my English language learning.	1.96	1.26
14. I listen to English songs to improve English in free time.	3.03	1.15

Students' Investment in English Language Learning in terms of Agency

The results in Table 5 reveal agency (8 items). Many students occasionally "[searched] for English music or movie videos on the Internet (item 15: M=3.06, SD=1.05) and "[looked] for relationships with people who [could] speak English" (item 22: M=2.67, SD=1.17). Moreover, they seldom looked for "applications on [their] cell phone to improve [their] vocabulary" (item 20: M=2.59, SD=1.25), "readings in English (internet, magazines or books) to improve [their] English" (item 16: M=2.31, SD=1.20), "online communities to practice [their] English" (item 17: M=2.41, SD=1.29). Nevertheless, they never sought "social groups to practice English skills" (item 21: M=1.54, SD=1.01), "cultural activities to understand native/non-native speakers' using English" (item 19: M=1.11 SD=1.06), and "public events or places to practice with native/non-native speakers of English" (item 18: M=.95, SD=1.02). To conclude, students were seen not

to actively get themselves engaged in looking for opportunities to enhance their English language learning.

Table 5. Students' Investment in English Language Learning in terms of Agency

Statements	N= 94	
	M	**SD**
15. I search for English music or movie videos on the Internet.	3.06	1.05
16. I look for readings in English (internet, magazines or books) to improve my English.	2.31	1.20
17. I look for online communities to practice my English.	2.41	1.29
18. I seek public events or places to practice with native/non-native speakers of English.	.95	1.02
19. I seek cultural activities to understand native/non-native speakers' using English.	1.11	1.06
20. I search for applications on my cell phone to improve my vocabulary.	2.59	1.25
21. I seek social groups to practice English skills.	1.54	1.01
22. I look for relationships with people who can speak English.	2.67	1.17

2.2.2. Discussion

The current study delved into students' investment in their English language learning and found that students did not invest in English language learning. Such their poor investment in English language learning was reflected through four aspects (commitment to language learning, identity, resources, and agency). Specifically, it was noticed that students seemed not to be much committed to their English language learning, and consequently they did not frequently invest their time, money, and effort to enhance their English language learning. Most of their English learning activities were occasionally, rarely or never conducted. One of the plausible explanations for this might be that English may not be students' favorite subject at school. Although many of them (52.1%) took English courses at English language centers, they did not invest much in English language learning. Additionally, students may spend more time, money, and effort on other important and difficult subjects (e.g., maths, physics, chemistry, etc.) as they were high school students who were supposed to prepare for their high school graduation examination. Among surveyed activities, students were seen to invest in easy-to-do activities (e.g., listening to English songs, watching motives, making friends with foreigners) other than listening to English news and joining non-formal activities/public events/places/cultural activities to practice English. This could be because of students' low English proficiency, and such activities may not acquire them to have levels of language proficiency. This finding was not supported by the study conducted by Tran and Luong [19] who found that their research participants deployed their investment in English language learning at more frequently than those in this study. This discrepancy may be due to the level of study. Tran and Luong's [19] participants were university students, while participants were high school ones.

The study also indicated that students did not often get engaged in seeking sources and social support (e.g., online communities, public events, cultural activities, social groups, relationship) for their English language learning. The explanations could be that students might not be highly motivated to learn English, and they have no pressure to improve their English; as a result, they may not need other extra activities to do after school since the lengthy and rigorous language-learning process may fatigue them. Lack of time, especially outside the school, has made language learning difficult for many learners, especially adults. This finding was supported by Chan [9], who found that extracurricular activities, indicating learning time, correlated with language competence. Furthermore, students might not perceive English as an important subject relevant to their future career paths, especially if they plan to work in environments where English is not commonly used. This perceived lack of relevance could reduce their willingness to learn the language beyond what school requires. It could be noticed that this finding was in line with the

result of the research of Novrianti [18], who found that students with career aspirations outside fields requiring solid English skills (e.g., local trade professions) might struggle to connect English proficiency to their future success.

3. Conclusions

The present study concluded that most of students did not frequently invest in enhancing their English language learning. They spent little time, effort, and money fostering commitment to language learning, identity, resources, and agency. From such findings, some pedagogical implications are drawn. Firstly, students should be fully aware of the importance of English as English is a lingua franca or an international language, so that they can priotise their English language learning and invest more time, money, and effort in English language learning. Secondly, strategies for investing (e.g., planning, monitoring, and evaluating the learning process) in English language learning should be explicitly embedded in the English language learning process. Once students have understood and mastered strategies for investing in English language learning, they will be willing to deploy such strategies to improve their English proficiency. Thirdly, students should be motivated to learn and use English so that they will see the benefits of English language learning. Accordingly, they will get engaged in allocating more time, money, and effort to their English language learning. Fourthly, school administrators should provide incentives (e.g., academic credits, scholarships, certificates of achievement, public recognition, or tangible rewards) to encourage students to learn English inside class and out of class. Additionally, administrators should provide students with clear guidance, resources, and support to help them to invest in English language learning effectively.

Some limitations from this study can be observed. Firstly, this study employed a quantitative design using a single research instrument (i.e., questionnaire) to collect data from a small sample, so the findings may not be generalised to other contexts. Secondly, only 10th grade students from one research context were involved in this study, so this study could not provide a holistic picture of students' investment in English language learning in the research context. Therefore, further studies should employ more sophisticated research methodologies, a larger and more diverse sample size (e.g., students from grades 10, 11, and 12), and more research instruments to yield valuable insights into the nuances of students' investment in English language learning. Furthermore, a longitudinal research design should be considered as it can track students' investment in English language learning over a long period of time, which would allow researchers to observe the dynamic nature of investment, identify any changes or patterns over time, and explore the factors that contribute to the development or decline of investment.

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